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[Sheldon Pearce](#)

Pearce has been writing about music for GO since 2020.

You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

The music that Nick Cave makes is often preoccupied with the unresolved. Whether fronting the short-lived Australian post-punk band the Birthday Party, working with his long-running project the Bad Seeds, or collaborating with the Bad Seeds member and multi-instrumentalist Warren Ellis, the singer-songwriter and composer has sung compellingly of death and dysfunction, in a gripping, broken-down voice that implies as much melodrama and sensitivity as acidity and malaise. Even as Cave’s sound swung dramatically from goth rock (“Your Funeral . . . My Trial,” from 1986) to moody piano (“The Boatman’s Call,” from 1997) and then garage rock (“Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!,” from 2008), the artist found himself circling back to morbid imagery and unsustainable love, wretched characters seeking redemption that might never come—a world of endless abstractions sprung from the mind of a self-professed “young troublemaker, drug addict, chaos-maker.”



Photograph by Megan Cullen

In recent years, there has been even more reason for Cave to ruminate on chaos and its reverberations, both tragic and beautiful. In 2015, his fifteen-year-old son, Arthur, died after falling from a cliff, and in 2022, after Cave had completed the interviews for his book “[Faith, Hope and Carnage](#),” which considered loss, grief, and emerging from its fog, he lost another of his sons, Jethro. Amid these devastating tragedies, he found salvation in communing with his fans, through a recurring Q. & A. newsletter, “The Red Hand Files.” (Amanda Petrusich also [spoke with him](#) last year for this magazine.)

The music he’s made with such misery in view has been hauntingly poignant and transfixing. The Bad Seeds albums released since Arthur’s death—“Skeleton Tree” (2016) and “[Ghosteen](#)” (2019)—are subtle, sweeping records of harmonic detail that draw the ear directly to Cave’s mutable chants. “Everybody’s losing someone / It’s a long way to find peace of mind / And I’m just waiting now, for my time to come / And I’m just waiting now, for peace to come,” he sings on “Hollywood,” his voice lithe, weightless. As he and the Bad Seeds prep the new album “Wild God” (out on Aug. 30), the veteran musician performs alone at National Sawdust, on Aug. 15, for the Grammy Museum’s New York City program series.



About Town

Off Broadway

Ariel Stess's **"Kara & Emma & Barbara & Miranda,"** directed by Meghan Finn, is a superb lo-fi slow burn: a sequence of seemingly desultory storytelling episodes, concealing a spectacularly precise structure. The four women of the title (Meghan Emery Gaffney, Kallan Dana, Colleen Werthmann, and Zoë Geltman, respectively) narrate overlapping interactions with various guys (each played by Paul Ketchum): babysitter Emma, daughter of Barbara, runs away with Kara's drippy husband, who shops at an REI where Miranda works with the glutinous George. Will all four women ever meet? The cast is tremendous, with Geltman and Werthmann operating as comic turbo engines. Together, they whip the last half hour into a mad, rotating farce, which, at its wildest moment, generates a surprising, stirring moment of calm.—*Helen Shaw (The Tank; through Aug. 17.)*

Dance

Calvin Royal III, a long-limbed, divinely elegant principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, is trying his hand at producing and directing while also starring. The two programs making up his one-week **"Ballet Festival: UNITE"** are heavy on solos and duets. There's some Balanchine and Kenneth MacMillan in the mix, but much more is by living choreographers, most of them better known as dancers. The biggest draw is the list of guest performers, which includes a bunch of Royal's A.B.T. colleagues, plus standouts from

other companies who are rarely seen in New York, such as Boston Ballet's Chyrstyn Fentroy and the Paris Opera Ballet's Sae Eun Park.—*Brian Seibert* (*Joyce Theatre; Aug. 13-18.*)

Art



“Martine (Herminia) Rivera (Cha Cha Girls) Pasadena,” 1987.

Photograph by Reynaldo Rivera / Courtesy MOMA PS1

Although there are a number of terrific individual images in the thoughtfully arranged but underlit show “**Reynaldo Rivera: Fistful of Love/También la belleza**,” you have to look for them. That’s because the exhibition’s primary strength is not as “art” photography—Rivera’s work is fairly artless; he’s a documentarian with shades of Nan Goldin—but as a large installation, for which

Rivera, who was born in Mexicali, Mexico, made largely black-and-white images of a post-punk, Los Angeles-based Latinx world we don't know enough about. Some prints are large and some small, and the juxtaposition looks good, particularly in relation to vitrines containing flyers and other program notes, which tell us a great deal about the performance scene that has inspired and energized Rivera. His photographs are an act of excavation in service to a hitherto marginalized world.—*Hilton Als* (MOMA PS1; through Sept. 9.)

Experimental Folk

In 2009, the experimental folk musician Roberto Carlos Lange started **Helado Negro**, leaving behind “very leftist leaning political music,” which he made in the two-thousands, for music with a softer focus—just as politically aware but more perspective-driven. In the past six years, Lange, a child of Ecuadorian immigrants who writes and sings in English and Spanish, drawn as much to synths as to guitars, demonstrated not just range but depth. The musing, atmospheric “This Is How You Smile” (2019) and the rhythmic and radiant, Laraaji-inspired “Far In” (2021) opened the door for this year’s “Phasor,” his best record yet, composed of glistening “tone poems,” through which he pivots to hallucinatory fiction.—*Sheldon Pearce* (Knockdown Center; Aug. 16.)

Movies



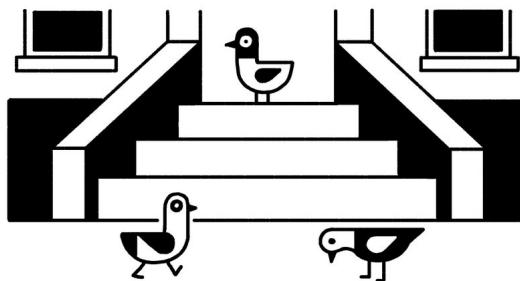
Blake Lively in “It Ends with Us.”
Photograph by Nicole Rivelli / Courtesy Sony

One of the key movie genres, romantic melodrama, has been neglected by Hollywood in recent years, but it comes roaring back with sincere and ardent passion in **“It Ends with Us,”** an adaptation of a novel by Colleen Hoover, directed by Justin Baldoni (who also co-stars). Blake Lively plays Lily Bloom, a Boston florist who grew up in a household with a violently abusive father. She meets a neurosurgeon, Ryle Kincaid (Baldoni), and their mutual attraction is fierce, but she is nonetheless wary; as their relationship develops, it’s complicated by the reappearance of one of her former boyfriends. The drama is driven both by some implausible yet breathtaking coincidences and by the intensity of the performances—especially that of Lively, who infuses middle-class desires and fears with tragic power.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

Off Broadway

Doménica Feraud’s **“Someone Spectacular,”** an apparently realistic play about a grief-counselling group, directed by Tatiana Pandiani, seems to be dealing with its own sorrow: the script uses humor to deflect from its characters’ darkest moments—best when the wry Damian Young, playing a widowed businessman, cracks

wise—and it even decompensates, as the sounds of some other reality infiltrate the room. Feraud wants to show what it's actually like to be destabilized by a death: in the group's ninety-minute session, we see how bereavement has made some of the sufferers wise and others cruel. Participants bicker about their comparative levels of loss, and, as the narratives blur into one another, Feraud's anguish, explained in the program, suffuses them all.—H.S.
(Pershing Square Signature Center; through Sept. 7.)



In the Neighborhood



Illustration by Rose Wong

I brought my new baby home to Bedford-Stuyvesant last week. I moved to the neighborhood earlier this year, largely because of the baby's approaching arrival. (This, at least, is not new to me: I have, a few times in my life, picked up and moved on account of love.) Funny how a change in life's direction can also change how you see familiar streets. Usually, I roam Bed-Stuy thinking about the past. On Putnam Avenue, I pass **Concord Baptist Church**, where, for almost half a century, Gardner C. Taylor—the “dean of Black preachers in America”—proposed the Gospel on the one hand and civil rights on the other. Across the street: the profligately beautiful **Boys High School** building, with its proud bell tower and its thousands of minute decorative details, all redolent of a time when the city’s political establishment equated, at least publicly, the virtues of education with the dignity of serious architecture. Now, though, I’m thinking of this leafy area’s green shoots—newer spots that my daughter might grow alongside. At **Little Grenjai**, the upstart Thai restaurant on Gates Avenue, I eat Brussels sprouts sprinkled with hot Thai basil, and noodles topped with a big, hulking thing of pork belly: long lunch, dank nap, every time. My favorite place may be the three-year-old independent bookstore **The Word Is Change**, on Tompkins Avenue. Its founder, Alexander Dwinell, curates a smart mix of radical politics, good literature, and gleaming first editions. Recently, I got a copy of “[In the South Bronx of America](#),” the photographer Mel Rosenthal’s book documenting the fires—literal and spiritual—of seventies New York. The store, like the neighborhood it so thoroughly enriches—like a family, when it’s working well—is a kind of panorama, melding history and the surprises of the moment.—

Vinson Cunningham

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Roxane Gay \(writing\) on TikTok](#)
- [A pro-D.M.V. stance](#)

- The ultimate summer salad
-

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[The Food Scene](#)

Strange Delight Channels New Orleans in All the Right Ways

The new seafood restaurant in Fort Greene treats the Crescent City with subtlety and studiousness, without sacrificing any fun.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

August 4, 2024



The oysters Rockefeller (right) and charbroiled oysters are both inspired by famous New Orleans dishes, but, like all the cooking at Strange Delight, they are more riffs than facsimiles.

Photographs by Scott Semler for The New Yorker

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

It's rare to find a Ramos Gin Fizz in this town, perhaps because of the labor involved in making one. The ingredients in the beverage, a hundred-and-forty-year-old New Orleans specialty, aren't too exotic: fresh lemon juice, simple syrup, a splash of orange-blossom water, a drop of cream for richness, and whipped egg white for body. But to get the drink's signature baby-smooth texture, its lighter-than-air foamy lift, the little white cap that rises above the rim of the highball glass like a sweet and boozy soufflé, you've got to shake the mixture with the intensity and focus of a politician glad-handing at a New Hampshire diner. Twelve to fifteen minutes of shaking, they say, which is more time than most bartender

staffing schedules (not to mention most human triceps) will allow. You can find a classic version at Valerie, the midtown gin lounge. Shinji's, a mad-scientist cocktail parlor in Flatiron, uses "moon rocks"—tiny pebbles of nitrous-frozen heavy cream which do something molecular that condenses the whole process to just five seconds. No matter the approach, it's not a drink undertaken lightly.

At Strange Delight, a scintillating new Crescent City-inspired seafood restaurant in Fort Greene, the first Ramos Gin Fizz I ordered took something like three weeks. Despite its place of honor on the cocktail side of the menu, when I first asked for the drink I was told that, alas, the team hadn't yet nailed its version, a portion for two that runs a somewhat reasonable forty dollars. There's no hurrying perfection: what finally arrived, on a subsequent visit, was a dream in a glass, with the zip of citrus and the velvet of cream, and the fizz in the Fizz kept fizzy by a little sidecar of club soda intended to be poured in bit by bit. When I asked Anoop Pillarisetti, one of the restaurant's owners, what took so long to get right, he told me that the missing ingredient was actually a tool: an iSi carbonation cannister, suggested by Ham El-Waylly, the restaurant's co-owner and chef, which helped streamline drink-making time.

Strange Delight is friendly, and low-key in a meticulous sort of way; it's the kind of restaurant where it feels perfectly natural to find a legendarily difficult cocktail, rigorously simplified. New Orleans-inspired restaurants have too often veered toward cultural caricature—think gaudy interiors draped in Mardi Gras beads and artificial Spanish moss, presumably to distract from slop-like gumbo and étouffée. Strange Delight is the latest in a small crew of excellent Cajun and Creole joints that have opened in the city in recent years, among them tiny [Lowerline](#), in Prospect Heights; Filé Gumbo Bar, in Tribeca; and the clever Korean-Cajun hybrid [Kjun](#), in Murray Hill. But none has evoked the city of inspiration quite so subtly and studiously. Strange Delight visually quotes certain

details of storied New Orleans restaurants: the tiled walls of a long counter in a front room call to mind Casamento's, the famous oyster bar. The tiled floors are reminiscent of the classic French Quarter eatery Arnaud's. The higher-than-head-height coat hooks are straight out of Galatoire's, and the green-and-white color scheme summons the iconic window shutters at Treme's legendary Creole restaurant Dooky Chase. The inspiration is on the menu, as well, in charbroiled oysters "inspired by Felix's," or fried-shrimp and fried-oyster sandwiches—a.k.a. "loaves"—that are "a loving homage to Casamento's." I found this food-nerdy reverence irresistibly charming.

El-Waylly mans the pass in Strange Delight's slip of a kitchen. A chef and recipe developer, he has lately become a serious culinary social-media star alongside his wife, Sohla (who is not connected to the restaurant), and his charisma turns out to be considerable in real life, too. (The first time I met him, he was wearing Birkenstock clogs in a striking [Yves Klein blue](#); I immediately bought an identical pair.) Pillarisetti, a veteran of Momofuku and Shake Shack, can often be spotted keeping an eye on the dining room; the two are partners with Michael Tuiach, of the vegan fast-food mini-chain Moonburger. Smartly, the menu's culinary homages are more riffs than facsimiles. Galatoire's oysters Rockefeller, broiled with the expected spinach and dash of Herbsaint, are deepened with a hint of dill and a slinky, stinky wisp of anchovy. Casamento's fried-seafood sandwiches, piled high with pickles and Duke's mayo and shredded iceberg, are served not on the traditional Texas toast but between slices of chewy-soft and faintly sweet Japanese milk bread. Rich, creamy dips—a cold one made of smoked fish, a hot one made with fresh crab and a hit of Pernod—come with a brown-paper bag of buttery fried Saltines that have an unexpected red-pepper kick.



The BBQ shrimp (center) and a shrimp-loaf sandwich pay homage to renowned New Orleans restaurants.

Strange Delight bills itself as an oyster bar (for a time, the restaurant's Web site was oysterdisco.com), though just one variety of the bivalve at a time appears on the menu, in two sizes: big ones, for frying and broiling, and small ones, for serving raw, with a brisk mignonette dolled up with lashings of Peychaud's. There are a handful of vegetarian dishes—hush puppies, bronzed and crumbly, served with a dollop of butter whipped with Steen's cane syrup; a crunchy slaw of Chinese broccoli in a creamy vegan dressing that's reminiscent of Superiority Burger, in the best way; "mushroom à la escargot," a gorgeous puddle of garlic butter with plump cremini mushrooms. But the menu is, overwhelmingly, dedicated to the fruits of the sea. In fact, as far as I can tell, no nonaquatic creatures make appearances at all. There's still plenty to choose from, and it's hard to go wrong, though if you need to narrow things down I'd say you can skip the marinated crab claws, which are visually striking but fairly bland, and the striped bass amandine, which can't compete with a revelatory blackened swordfish belly that's so buttery and rich it's nearly liquid. In the course of several visits, I found myself returning to a few standouts: the Felix's-inspired oysters, broiled under a comforting, black-peppery blanket of parmesan and garlic, and a BBQ shrimp "derivative of Pascal's Manale," the New Orleans restaurant said to

have invented the dish. At Strange Delight, it features four enormous crustaceans peering out of a dark and velvety concoction made from beer, butter, and spices. The shrimp were delicious, head and all, but the sauce was so magnificent—complex, savory, sweet, sultry—that I was tempted to lift the bowl and slurp it down like soup.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

A meal at Strange Delight can feel refined or rowdy, depending on where you sit. The front room, with counter seats outlining the oyster bar and high-top tables along the walls, has a mood of communal vivacity—the ring of cross-table conversation, the banter of hustling cooks and shuckers, the non-stop movement of servers wiggling through the narrow spaces between tables. All of it is amplified by the shiny, acoustic-enhancing tiled walls, but it's a cacophony that feels energizing rather than overwhelming.

Through a narrow passage, past a glass-walled wine-storage area containing an impressive selection of natural bottles, lies a high-ceilinged back dining room anchored by an enormous wood-and-marble bar. This room, too, feels like a version of New Orleans—more modern, a little sleeker, less burdened by the weight of history and tradition. In this room, lingering over Le Grande Remoulade (a heaping portion of chilled shrimp and crab, sweet and briny, tossed in a creamy sauce tinged pink with spices, alongside an array of crudités and a satin-yolked boiled egg) feels leisurely rather than boisterous. Toward the end of dinner in the back room one evening, having giddily over-ordered and reached a physical inability to carry on eating, I nevertheless found myself taking bite after bite of the little portion of bread pudding that all diners receive as a complimentary dessert, prolonging the meal, delaying my departure, simply because being there felt so good. ♦

An earlier version of this article inaccurately described a dish pictured in a photograph.



Helen Rosner, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, *The Food Scene*.

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The Talk of the Town

- **[Funny/Unfunny: The Archival Comedy Issue](#)**

By Emma Allen | Do jokes express our otherwise taboo wishes? Or does everyone just need a pie in the face?

- **[Robin Williams Works Out](#)**

By Lillian Ross | Telling jokes in night clubs, the comedian says, “peels away all pretension. It’s like running in an open field.”

- **[Who’s the Funniest Rabbi on the Upper West Side?](#)**

By Mark Singer | In a basement standup club, religious leaders compete, and also worry: Are their parking places orthodox?

- **[Joan Rivers Gives a Happiness Seminar](#)**

By Zoë Heller | Preaching to a crowd of acolytes at a New York Crowne Plaza hotel, the tough-as-nails comedian offers a self-help message: “You’re victors, not victims!”

- **[A Liquidation Sale at Girl Scout Headquarters](#)**

By Susan Orlean | Herman Miller Eames chairs: yes. Activity badges that Mom always promised to sew on but never did: no. Cookies: ditto.

- **[Buster Keaton Visits the “Today” Show](#)**

By Brendan Gill | At sixty-eight, the comedian reflects on his vaudeville beginnings and the best kind of pie for throwing: double crust, raw filling, with whipped cream on top.

[Comment](#)

Funny/Unfunny: The Archival Comedy Issue

Do jokes express our otherwise taboo wishes? Or does everyone just need a pie in the face?

By [Emma Allen](#)

August 12, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Many readers believe that, at some point in time, they should have won this magazine's Cartoon Caption Contest, because their friends think that they're very funny. Others are simply stumped. For

instance, Michael Bloomberg, our erstwhile billionaire mayor, was repeatedly stymied, though we hear he always gets a laugh at the Harvard Club. For the record: the caption contest is more democratic than the American political system. Readers vote on whether captions are “Unfunny,” “Somewhat funny,” or “Funny,” then choose from finalists to select the ultimate winner. The Electoral College is entirely left out of it.

But, back up—what actually makes something funny? Amusingly, perhaps, even the top-rated caption-contest submissions receive mostly “Unfunny” ratings. Turns out that it’s extremely hard to be even moderately humorous. One of the few things A.I. can’t do well is write a joke—a fact that we can all cling to when we’re sent into the mines by our robot overlords. Fortunately, you can rely on publications like *The New Yorker*—which was, after all, founded as a “comic weekly,” just shy of a century ago—to provide you with a sampler of the funniest things out there (mixed in with some really long, unfunny things that I definitely also read). To that end, this week, we’re serving up a smorgasbord of great, hilarious articles from our archive that explore the history and the essence of comedy. For instance, why is the funniest number thirty-two (per Sid Caesar’s writers)? Why are the funniest names (per someone named *Melvin Helitzer*) Gladys, Chuck, José, Hortense, and Lucky Pierre? Or, per our own cartoonists, why is the F train the best one to satirize? (Had to throw that in—rule of three.)

Hilton Als, in his 1999 piece on Richard Pryor, recounts how the comedian for years walked onstage and announced, “Hi. I’m Richard Pryor. Hope I’m funny.” But how do you even get to the point where you dare to hope? In high school, my best friend took me aside one day and feverishly confided that she’d been taking standup-comedy classes and was going to perform at open mikes around New York City. And so began my teen-age tour of weird amateur comedy. I would tell you about Enema Guy—he used the

microphone stand *and* stool as props!—but there are much better stories to read in the pages that follow.

These days, it feels as if we need humor more than ever to give us a break from our near-apocalyptic reality, and to needle the inflated egos of tyrants and other powerful fools. Pryor, in his written remarks upon receiving the inaugural Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, said, “Two things people throughout history have had in common are hatred and humor. I am proud that, like Mark Twain, I have been able to use humor to lessen people’s hatred!”

But sometimes what we need most is just a pie in the face, courtesy of Buster Keaton, who (read on) will tell you the best type of pie to throw: doubled-up crust, uncooked filling, maybe some whipped cream on top. Or as Sigmund Freud put it, as summarized in a piece by Tad Friend herein, “Jokes are our way of expressing otherwise taboo wishes (sleeping with your mother, killing your father, etc.).” Huh, pretty funny—almost makes you miss Enema Guy. ♦



Emma Allen is *The New Yorker*'s cartoon editor and edits humor pieces on newyorker.com.

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[Going Bananas](#)

Robin Williams Works Out

Telling jokes in night clubs, the comedian says, “peels away all pretension. It’s like running in an open field.”

By [Lillian Ross](#)

April 7, 1986



Illustration by João Fazenda

During the past decade, Robin Williams, the thirty-four-year-old comic actor, who seems to connect with his audiences on some

wild, deep level and to make them laugh in a special way, at once loud, true, and happy, has been featured in two television programs ("Mork & Mindy" and the 1977 revival of "Laugh-In"), six movies ("Popeye," "The World According to Garp," "The Survivors," "Moscow on the Hudson," "The Best of Times," and the forthcoming "Club Paradise"), two concert performances on videocassette, and two record albums ("Reality . . . What a Concept" and "Throbbing Python of Love"). One kind of performing, however, Williams has been doing non-stop—before, during, and since his television, movie, concert, and recording activities—and that is working out, in unannounced appearances, in small, late-night comedy clubs: in the Comedy Store, in Los Angeles; in Yuk-Yuk's, in Toronto; in the Second City, in Chicago; in the Holy City Zoo, in San Francisco; in Catch a Rising Star, in New York; and in others that have become established since the early nineteen-seventies in dozens of cities in the United States. Well before flying west to be an Oscar host extraordinaire, Williams was in New York, helping to organize last week's "Comic Relief" cable-television show—a benefit to raise money for the nation's homeless—and we tagged along with him for a while as he embarked on his midnight-and-after workouts.

When we met Williams, he had been sitting for four hours at the Public Theatre watching "Hamlet," and he emerged looking wilted and done in. He is a stocky, mild-seeming man with a rubbery face and body, which we were accustomed to seeing, in performance, go in seconds from Barry Fitzgerald to William F. Buckley, Jr., and on to Jerry Falwell, to Jesse Jackson, to Nadia Comaneci, and to God knows who or what else—always, in his inimitable way, simultaneously sharp and gentle. Now, wearing baggy brown pants tight at the ankles, black hiking boots, and a yellow rain jacket, he was calm and subdued. He expressed admiration for Kevin Kline as Hamlet and for Harriet Harris as Ophelia, noting that both actors were, like him, alumni of the Juilliard Theatre Center. He said that Jeff Weiss, a first-timer in a legitimate production, who had taken

the roles of the Ghost, the Player King, and Osric, the unctuous courtier, was impressive. Then, in the taxi heading for Catch a Rising Star (First Avenue near Seventy-seventh), Williams suddenly, quietly, became, successively, a Yiddish-accented Hamlet lamenting Yorick “buried in *treyf*”; an insane Hamlet in a mental institution playing all the parts in the play; a “Hamlet” featuring George Jessel as the Ghost; a Woody Allen Hamlet, sounding exactly like Woody Allen saying “I don’t know whether I should avenge him or honor him”; a Jack Nicholson Hamlet, sounding exactly like Jack Nicholson saying “To be or not to bleeping be . . . ”

Then Williams retreated into his own calm, and we spent the rest of the taxi ride having him give us a quick refresher course in his history: Born in Chicago, an only child, his father an automobile-company vice-president (“He looks like a British Army officer”), who retired and moved the family to Marin County, outside San Francisco, and his mother a “very funny” prankster and cutup, originally from the South, who loves to tell jokes. “I was good in languages and thought I’d go into the Foreign Service, or something like that,” Williams told us. “In high school, I was heavily into cross-country running, which I loved, and wrestling, which gave me a chance to do some damage. I went to one of the Claremont Colleges, where I took courses in political science and economics and failed them. After the first year, I left Claremont and went to the College of Marin, near home, which had an amazing Drama Department, with teachers who told me about Juilliard. I auditioned for Juilliard, got a full scholarship, and stayed three years, doing Shakespeare and Strindberg. Back home, I started going nightly to a coffeehouse called the Intersection, on Union Street in San Francisco. During the day, I worked in an ice-cream parlor. One night, at the coffeehouse, for no reason at all, I got up and imitated a quarterback high on LSD. It felt great. This was fun. No one was telling me what to do. I liked the freedom.”

[More from the Archive](#)

Sign up for Classics, a twice-weekly newsletter featuring notable pieces from the past.

By the time we arrived at Catch a Rising Star, it was packed: standees three deep at the bar in front; an audience of about a hundred and fifty in the back room, seated at little tables, having drinks, facing a small platform with a standing mike. On the wall behind the platform were signs saying “BREAK A LEG” and “MONOGRAM PICTURES CORP. ENTRANCE,” and nearby was a montage painting of famous comedians—Eddie Cantor, Charlie Chaplin, Milton Berle, and Abbott and Costello. On the platform, a young m.c.—short, chubby, with dark curly hair, and wearing a long-sleeved sports shirt over a T-shirt—was getting ready laughs with routine questions of and comments on the audience, which consisted mostly of young singles, young couples, foursomes of young women, threesomes of young men. The m.c. left after introducing his replacement, a tall, rangy man with thinning hair who wore jeans and a red sweater. The replacement worked for about fifteen minutes, getting dutiful laughs by telling “family” jokes: “My mother had four children. I was the only vertebrate one,” and “We have a dog. He’s half retriever, half vulture. He’s been circling Grandma.”

The chubby m.c. returned and announced that Robin Williams was there, and the place went bananas. Screams, yells, whistles, shrieks, cheers, and tremendous applause. Williams took the mike. He said, speaking as an Oscar recipient, “Thank you for making this possible. [As a snobbish theatregoer] As long as I have my glasses on, the world is mine. I just went to see ‘Hamlet.’ I want to see Hamlet played by Sly Stallone. [As Stallone] ‘To be or what?’ [As himself] Maybe he and Schwarzenegger can do a movie together. [As Schwarzenegger] With subtitles in English.”

Williams went, again in seconds, from being one human cell to being Central Park squirrels, New York City pigeons (“I could fly, but I like it here”), another Oscar recipient (“I’d like to thank anybody who didn’t try to kill me”), himself as penitent (“I’m sorry, God, I’m sorry that I made fun of everybody”), a Japanese manufacturer (“Not my fault, American-made”).

People in the audience called out subjects they had heard him do before, and these set Williams off on an even more manic scale. He went from gangster to drunk and on to Gorbachev, Reagan, Charles Kuralt covering toxic waste in New Jersey. He went from Mrs. Marcos to Louis Farrakhan and on to a small child watching his father leave and crying at a window and then turning away from the window, tearless, and saying, “Let’s put on that Fisher-Price music and get crazy.” (Williams has a three-year-old son, Zachary.)

Williams stayed on for about half an hour and came off looking refreshed and ready for anything. The following evening, in a taxi heading for the Improvisation (Forty-fourth near Eighth), he gave us a minicourse in comedy clubs. “That audience last night was made up of the bridge-and-tunnel people. They come in from New Jersey and Connecticut. They’re a challenge. You can get a big reception, but if it’s not working—one time, twice—then there’s nothing. Some comics have a lot of pride. They’ll do the material they set out to do, no matter what. I’m more chameleonlike. I find the basic level of the audience. Last night, I felt in the groove. I felt comfortable. I like going to the clubs, because it peels away all pretensions. About a week ago, I went to the Comedy Store, in Los Angeles. I was talking about bizarre things. I got going doing this whole thing about travelling at the speed of light, losing your luggage beforehand, doing Albert Einstein as Mr. Rogers, improvising. It was fun. It was like running in an open field.”

At the Improvisation, there was even louder screaming and yelling at the mention of Robin Williams. Again, he started out as an Oscar winner, sanctimoniously: “Thank you for your kindness. Your

words are so meaningful.” Then he was South Africa’s Botha, and after that he became the state of Michigan and the Statue of Liberty and Frank Sinatra and Jewish hunters (“Let’s go out to the country and see if anything died”) and Lee Iacocca and Henry Kissinger and El Al Airlines.

After a while, someone in the audience called out “Dr. Ruth!”

“Dr. Rufe?” Williams asked, having obviously misheard the name. Then he got it, and immediately used the error to take off as a black woman preacher giving sex advice in a scolding vein. “Get yoh act together, now,” he said. “Yoh look lahk a Ken doll. Don’t yoh look at me wid dose mascara eyes goin’ flip-flap. Get on dat highway and make sure de bridge is open.” He kept it going for a good fifteen minutes. The audience was beside itself. At the end, Williams came off looking exhilarated and told us that that one had been brand-new—a breakthrough. He looked as though he had been running in an open field. ♦

Lillian Ross (1918-2017) joined the staff of The New Yorker in 1945, during the Second World War, and worked with Harold Ross, the magazine’s founder and first editor.

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[Who's Funnier?](#)

Who's the Funniest Rabbi on the Upper West Side?

In a basement standup club, religious leaders compete, and also worry: Are their parking places orthodox?

By [Mark Singer](#)

January 13, 1991



Illustration by João Fazenda

So, anyway, there are these eight rabbis in a basement, plus a reporter. Wait, sorry, we left out a part. It's not just eight rabbis, it's eight *funny* rabbis. O.K., so there are these eight funny rabbis in a basement. Hold it. We've got to check our notes here. Oh, right, it isn't exactly eight *funny* rabbis, it's eight rabbis who *think* they're funny. And these eight rabbis have all entered the Funniest-Rabbi Contest at Stand-Up New York, the comedy club in the West Seventies where on a typical week night amateurs go to find out what it's like to live or die in front of a flesh-and-blood audience, and where on occasion the club owners, Cary and Suzanne Hoffman, hold special standup-comedy competitions for lawyers, stockbrokers, accountants, teachers, fitness instructors, or, as on this particular night, rabbis.

So, anyway, this reporter wants to talk to these rabbis before they step into the spotlight for their three to five minutes each, and he asks the comedy club's publicity person, Jennifer Walker, where he can find them—"in the green room?" And she says, "No, in the Greenberg Room." So he goes to the Greenberg Room, which is really just a couch and two chairs in the middle of the basement—the Hoffmans' old furniture from when they were living in Florida—and there the rabbis are, lounging. There's one Chassid, with the beard and the hat and everything; two other Orthodox rabbis; three Conservative rabbis; a Reform rabbi; and a lapsed rabbi, who doesn't want to get too specific about what it is he does for a living at this point—only that it involves Israel and some sort of defense contracting. And there's another, not quite lapsed rabbi—not one of the original eight rabbis but a guy who has established residence in Vermont even though his congregation happens to be in Philadelphia, and who has also established a nice working relationship with a personal manager on Long Island, who arranges regular bookings for him with the aid of some personal-managerlike aggressiveness and palaver plus a hefty supply of postcard-size glossy photographs that say "Bob Alper—Rabbi/Stand-Up Comic (Really)."

But, seriously, the Chassidic rabbi's name is Shea Hecht, and he's the least bashful of the eight amateur-comedian rabbis, so the reporter has to do no prompting to get him talking about himself. Rabbi Hecht says, "My congregation is the Seaview Jewish Center, in Canarsie. I only heard about this contest a few days ago. I got a call last Friday, five minutes before sundown. I'd never done anything like this before, but I bounced a few ideas off a couple of friends, and it seemed to work. They said my routine had potential—if the delivery was right. I know it'll work, because I'm a survivor. I'm one of twelve kids—seven boys and five girls. I wasn't a very good student, so that's how I became a rabbi. Four of my brothers are pulpit rabbis. One brother-in-law is in business. One brother-in-law is a comptroller of a Jewish organization. Two of my brothers-in-law run congregations. I have two stepbrothers who are involved in Jewish education. How many is that—ten? Oh, well, one of my stepbrothers married my sister. It was O.K., because they weren't technically stepbrothers; they were twins who came to live with us when they were ten. You understand Yiddish? You know what a *machuten* is? That's your child's father-in-law. My father, he should rest in peace, used to say that from my sister marrying my stepbrother he got the only *machuten* he doesn't have to fight with."

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By this point the reporter is willing to listen to the family histories of any of the other rabbis, but the rabbis are all too busy worrying—either, like Rabbi Ronald Brown, of Merrick, about whether his parking space is, according to orthodox New York City law, strictly legal or else, like Rabbi Robert Harris, of Pelham Manor, who's holding a crib sheet and scrutinizing it as if it were a fragment of ancient Phoenician text or something, about the possibility that the instant he steps onstage he'll completely forget why he's there. But

when it's just about time for the rabbis to go upstairs and watch Rabbi Alper spend fifteen minutes warming up the crowd they begin either to loosen up a little or to chatter nervously—it's hard to tell which. First, the defense-contractor rabbi talks about why he has entered the contest. "How did I find out about this? Roz Pincus called my mother. Who's Roz Pincus? A friend of my mother's." And then the two other Orthodox rabbis, Neil Fleischmann and Jay Yaakov Schwartz, start debating whether Rabbah bar Nachmani, a Talmudic sage who was well known for having taught that it was a nice custom to begin a class with a joke, actually did or did not say to his students in third-century Babylonia, "You know, a funny thing happened to me on the way to the synagogue today."

Rabbi Alper does such an excellent job warming up the crowd—"We follow Jewish tradition in our family. When our son was born we named him after my grandfather. We call him Grandpa"—that by the time the amateur-comedian rabbis come out and start doing their routines the room often gets so quiet you can hear some of the rabbis chanting the traditional Hebrew prayer for laughter. A couple of the rabbis suffer because they tell jokes that aren't funny, and a couple have serious logistical problems resulting in non-delivery, but only one rabbi manages to bomb so miserably that in the middle of his monologue several audience members spontaneously decide to do their impersonations of people who suddenly realize they've stayed too long at a wedding reception.

O.K., so Robert Harris, the rabbi from Pelham Manor, wins easily, because the judges recognize that he has nice material and an engaging deadpan delivery, and because at no point does he say to the audience "And that's a true story, honestly, true story," and because they particularly like his anecdote about how he once lived on a kibbutz in Israel, not far from Nazareth, and how the kibbutz had a herd of dairy sheep and how nobody else on the kibbutz liked his idea of producing a line of merchandise to be called Cheeses of Nazareth. Winning entitles Rabbi Harris to a post-game interview

with a woman from Cablevision of New Jersey, plus a T-shirt, tickets to “Saturday Night Live” or an off-Broadway show, dinner at a famous restaurant, and an offer to return to Stand-Up New York and do another set and get paid for it.

So, anyway, while Rabbi Harris is being interviewed by the cable-TV woman about how when he was a seminary student he used to enjoy translating Broadway musicals—“Damn Yankees,” “Brigadoon,” “Camelot”—into Hebrew, and his wife, Nellie, is breathing a great sigh that the whole thing is over, because for days he has been more nervous than she has ever seen him except at Yom Kippur, the reporter decides to ask Cary Hoffman how he thinks the whole thing has gone.

The night-club owner looks at the reporter and says, “This was a very good night. Usually, on a Tuesday like this, we’ll get maybe seventy people in here. Tonight, we had two hundred. We charge a seven-dollar cover and a two-drink minimum. We never had a crowd this big and so many single checks.” ♦



Mark Singer has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1974 and is the author of “*Trump and Me.*”

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[Career Crisis](#)

Joan Rivers Gives a Happiness Seminar

Preaching to a crowd of acolytes at a New York Crowne Plaza hotel, the tough-as-nails comedian offers a self-help message: “You’re victors, not victims!”

By [Zoë Heller](#)

January 22, 1995



Illustration by João Fazenda

“Joan Rivers is giving a seminar?” said the man standing in the lobby of the Crowne Plaza in White Plains last Tuesday evening. He gazed at an army of suburban women storming through the ballroom doors. “So what’s it about?” he asked one woman as she hurried past.

“It’s a ‘You Deserve to Be Happy’ seminar,” she told him.

“Oh,” he said, pretending to get it. “Oh, *right*.”

Indeed, it was so. Ms. Rivers, fresh from two similar gigs, in Minneapolis and Cherry Hill, New Jersey, was scheduled to give an hour-and-a-half-long inspirational disquisition on how she “got through shit—twice.” Having coped with the suicide of her husband, Edgar, and a major career crisis in the late eighties, only to find herself once more “in the toilet, careerwise,” just last year, Rivers has been fine-tuning her survival strategies for some time. The seminar tour is a recent idea, however. “I’m hoping it will turn into something more definite—at the moment, it’s a nonprofit thing,” she explained a few days before the White Plains date. “Everybody is unhappy. Everyone is scared about something. There’s a time when we’ve all got to say, ‘Who cares what happened in my childhood? I’m sixty-one, for Christ’s sake—it’s time to get over it.’ ”

The four hundred or so women who had come to the Crowne Plaza brought with them an impressive array of misery and bad luck. “My brother killed himself six months ago,” said a woman sipping white wine in the bar before the seminar. “That’s terrible,” another woman said. “My husband is paralyzed from the waist down, and I just lost my job.” But at seven-fifteen, when Rivers arrived at the lectern, looking like a very glamorous Pekingese, in a hot-red suit and one of her QVC brooches—a spray of ruby-red cherries with crystal leaves—all griefs were temporarily forgotten. “She’s funny! She’s real!” a woman in the third row muttered dreamily as Rivers showed the audience the hole in her Donna Karan stockings.

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Rivers went on to assure the women that they were victors, not victims. “Our ancestors came to this country *because* they were victors,” she insisted. “They were all peasants who said, ‘Ach, I’m sick of this czar—I’m getting outta here!’” Everyone’s grief was valid, she said, except Princess Diana’s. (“*Oh please!* The woman had money, fame, two great-looking kids, and a husband who *didn’t* want to sleep with her.”) But the most important thing was to keep moving forward. Then she offered nine major tips for dealing with disaster, including recognizing your grief, getting into therapy, making a list of the terrible things in your life and then making a list of your blessings. “Life is a movie and you’re the star,” she said, in summing up the first half of the session. “Give it a happy ending.”

During the intermission, the women stood around discussing the Rivers philosophy. Mostly, they were approving. “That stuff she said about not fearing rejection?” one woman said. “I sell for a living, and that really spoke to me.”

“The woman has balls!” announced another woman, who had come from New Rochelle for the evening. In the line for the bathroom, skepticism reared its pretty head for a moment—“So I guess she’ll be making this into a book soon, and then audiotapes and then a video,” one woman said, leaning her head against a cubicle door—but it was quickly pushed down. “That’s right! That’s good!” said a woman with carmine hair and big earrings. “Joan’s an American!”

A Q. & A. session followed. One woman wanted to know what she should do now that her husband had left her and her seven-year-old child for another woman. “Son of a bitch!” Rivers cried, to rapturous applause. “Now move on. *Move on.* And don’t take the

piece of filth back!” She paused a moment, thinking. “*Unless*,” she added, holding up one perfectly manicured talon, “you get everything in your name.” ♦

Zoë Heller has written the novels “*Notes on a Scandal*,” “*The Believers*,” and “*Everything You Know*.”

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[Liquidation Dept.](#)

A Liquidation Sale at Girl Scout Headquarters

Herman Miller Eames chairs: yes. Activity badges that Mom always promised to sew on but never did: no. Cookies: ditto.

By [Susan Orlean](#)

August 2, 1992



Illustration by João Fazenda

Inventory of the liquidation sale of the recently vacated headquarters of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., at Third Avenue and Fiftieth Street:

Fourteenth floor. Three dozen assorted two-drawer lateral files. Ten workstations with acoustic panels. One case of booklets entitled

“The Impact of Minority Presence in Girl Scouting on White and Minority Communities.” Animal footprints, acorns for special craft projects, toasting sticks whittled from fallen tree branches, packages of gorp, illustrated chart of bandanna tricks: none. Girl Scout cookies, assorted flavors: none.

Twelfth floor. Orange Herman Miller Eames chairs, straight-backed wooden desk chairs, plastic stackable shell chairs in various colors. Troop Camper activity badges embroidered with little tents and trees, which Mom always promised to sew on when she had a free minute but never did: none. Cookies: ditto.

Eleventh floor. Wall-size chalkboard bearing message “We’ll Miss You, Carole! Goodbye 11th Floor at GS-USA! I’ll Miss You!!! Suzy.” Assorted vertical files. Those neat Brownie Girl Scout uniforms, with the little brown jumpers and the orange bow ties and the sash with membership stars, troop numbers, and trefoil Brownie pins on it, and with plenty of space for the activity badges sitting in a drawer and just waiting for someone with one minute to sew them on, the way all the other mothers managed to: negative. Cookies: zero.

Tenth floor. One package of brochures from the 1984 Girl Scout convention. Mechanicals of a Girl Scout book, opened to a section suggesting troop activities—a Saturday lunch cookout, a Halloween tea, carolling with a junior troop, a teen fashion show, a Thinking Day event, and a supper and square dance for fathers. One heavyset woman in a black plastic windbreaker “looking for something for the house.” No cookies.

Ninth floor. One impatient guy from a financial company looking for credenzas and worktables. Wait a minute—a *guy*?

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Eighth floor. Fifteen Steelmaster file cabinets. One gross of small bottles of Liquid Paper. Approximately ten Girl Scout-green tape dispensers. Approximately three employees of the Affordable Used Office Furniture Company, which was liquidating the items left behind by the Girl Scouts when they relocated to their new offices, on Fifth Avenue at Thirty-seventh Street. One Presto quartz heater in as-is condition. No Buddy burners, Vagabond stoves, or kindling. No cookies.

Seventh floor. More stuff, none edible.

Sixth floor. One Wilbur Curtis Model RU-300 coffee machine. One Diet Coke/Sprite/Coke dispenser. Cookies: no way.

Fifth floor. Acoustical office dividers covered in Scout-green fabric. Several boxes of green No. 2 pencils, embossed with the Girl Scout logo. No sunshine ponchos made by cutting up one of your mother's cocktail dresses. Cookies: still none, although an employee of Affordable Furniture walking by confirmed having sighted and then eaten several boxes of Thin Mints, Peanut Butter Sandwiches, and Peanut Butter Patties.

Fourth floor. A box of books entitled "Girl Scout Educational Opportunities," marked "THROW OUT." Defective telephones. Stepladders. Coffee tables. Coatracks. Typing tables. People singing the "Brownie Smile Song": none—at least, not audibly. Former members of Junior Scout Troop 453, Daffodil Patrol, performing paper-bag dramatics to an audience of seven vertical files with slide locks, two metal desks, and some commercial shelving: one. ♦



Susan Orlean began contributing to The New Yorker in 1987 and became a staff writer in 1992. She is the author of “[On Animals](#).”

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[Dept. of Clowning](#)

Buster Keaton Visits the “Today” Show

At sixty-eight, the comedian reflects on his vaudeville beginnings and the best kind of pie for throwing: double crust, raw filling, with whipped cream on top.

By [Brendan Gill](#)

April 19, 1963



Illustration by João Fazenda

Between the unbewitching hours of seven and nine this Friday morning, the TV show “Today” will be devoted to a conversation with Buster Keaton, supplemented by an extraordinary assortment of sequences from old Keaton movies, including “The General” and “Steamboat Bill, Jr.,” and the last two minutes of the first picture Keaton ever appeared in—“The Butcher Boy,” a two-reeler starring Fatty Arbuckle, which was filmed here, in a studio on East Forty-eighth Street, in 1917. Buster Keaton has long been one of our heroes—next to his friend Chaplin he was surely the greatest of the silent-film comedians—and we were delighted to accept an invitation from the “Today” people to watch, last Wednesday, in the Klieg-lit cavern of an N.B.C. studio, the taping of the program and to enjoy a few words with the great man. At sixty-eight, he is in excellent trim and, especially when he puts on his famous porkpie hat, is instantly recognizable as the sad-faced, invincibly unsmiling Buster of the Golden Age. “Professionally, I’m about as old as they come,” he told us. “Older than Chevalier, Ed Wynn, Francis X. Bushman. I’ve been acting for sixty-four years. I was playing in Tony Pastor’s Theatre, on East Fourteenth Street, before the twentieth century began.”

Buster’s father and mother had what he described as the roughest knockabout low-comedy act in the history of vaudeville. Buster joined it professionally at four, after a long apprenticeship backstage in a bassinet. By the time he was five or six, his father was getting laughs by hurling him bodily through the scenery, and once, in New Haven, when Buster was nine, his father pitched him all the way over the orchestra pit into the audience, by way of rebuking some Yale undergraduates for their reception of a saxophone solo by Buster’s mother. “I hit two Yale boys broadside. One of them got three ribs broke and the other lost two teeth,” Keaton told us, not without satisfaction. “It didn’t occur to my old man that *I* might get hurt. He knew me too well for that. I never got a lickin’ from the old man offstage. If he was sore at me for something, he’d save up till we went on, then beat the tar out of

me. Once in a while, I'd get back at him by hitting him extra hard with a shovel or broom handle. When I got started in Hollywood, I put him in my pictures. He's a Union general in 'The General.' Making one scene, I shoved the old man off a flatcar onto the tracks. He didn't mind. If you're a low-comedy clown, that's what you expect."

Keaton was twenty-two when he made "The Butcher Boy." It's a lucky accident that the movie still exists, because in 1922, after Arbuckle stood trial for having caused the death of a girl at a drunken party (in the end, he was acquitted), Will H. Hays, the newly appointed "czar" of the movie industry, ruled that the positives and negatives of all Arbuckle films should be destroyed. The only surviving print of "The Butcher Boy" was recently discovered, in Europe, by Raymond Rohauer, who has devoted himself for some years to collecting old Keaton pictures, and who is now overseeing a very successful commercial revival of them abroad. In "The Butcher Boy," Arbuckle throws a bag of flour at Keaton, and Keaton takes a terrible fall. "I didn't have to throw that fall," he said. "It was the real thing. Arbuckle caught me right smack in the face. He had a wonderful eye, Arbuckle did. Later, I took or threw an awful lot of pies. The art of pie-throwing depended on the pie. First, you had to make it with a double crust on the bottom, so you could get a good hold on it without your fingers' going through. Then you made the filling of the pie out of flour and water, uncooked, so it would be sticky and stringy, and you topped it off with, say, blueberries and whipped cream, or maybe a nice meringue. I never threw a pie in any of my feature-length pictures. By then we thought pies were pretty silly."

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The Keaton of those celebrated feature pictures wasn't simply a superb pantomimist; as James Agee has written of him, "Keaton worked strictly for laughs, but his work came from so far inside a curious and original spirit he achieved a great deal besides. . . . He brought pure physical comedy to its greatest heights. . . . With the humor, the craftsmanship, and the action there was often . . . a dreamlike beauty." As works of art, his pictures had a completeness all the more remarkable because they were made without a script. "Two or three writers and I would start with an idea and then we'd work out a strong finish and let the middle take care of itself, as it always does," Keaton said. "Sometimes, we'd work out a gag in advance; other times, it would work itself out as we went along. In those days, we didn't use miniatures or process shots. The way a thing looked on the screen was the way you'd done it. In 'Steamboat Bill, Jr.,' there's a windstorm that blows the whole front of a house over on top of me. I don't get killed, because there happens to be an open window in the part of the house that lands where I am. We used six old Liberty airplane engines to make the wind, and it really blew. The window of the house was just big enough to give me two inches' clearance on either side and above my head when the house came down. I drove a couple of tenpenny nails in the ground to mark the place where I had to stand, and I can tell you one thing—when the house started falling, I didn't sway."

Keaton wrote the story and continuity of "The General," directed it, cut it, and, of course, played the leading role. It was shot in eighteen weeks, at a cost of three hundred and thirty thousand dollars. "I was pretty proud of it at the time," he said. "Right now, it's playing all over Europe, and people are laughing harder at it today than they did in 1927, when it came out." Keaton went over to a TV monitor to watch a clip of one of his early two-reelers being run off. In the picture, he is being chased by what looks like hundreds of frantic cops; they are about to capture him when a car goes by and Keaton reaches out, grabs the brace supporting its

canvas top, and is jerked into momentary safety. At that point, something astonishing happened in the TV studio. On the screen was a mournful little man running lickety-split down the streets of a long since vanished Los Angeles; in the studio watching him was the same mournful little man, forty-two years older, and now, instead of being deadpan, the face was smiling. ♦

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In Search of the World's Funniest Joke

The semi-serious science of why we laugh.

By [Tad Friend](#)

November 3, 2002



Any comedy professional can tell you that a duck is funnier than a sparrow. But why?
Illustration by Jules Feiffer

One Saturday evening in late June, the master of ceremonies at the Ice House, a comedy club in Pasadena, California, told the audience that they were in for a special treat: Dr. Richard Wiseman,

a British scientist who was on a quest to determine the world's funniest joke, was going to come out and enlist the audience's help. The m.c., Debi Gutierrez, would tell jokes that particularly appealed to Americans who had visited Wiseman's humor Web site, and he would tell jokes favored by the British.

Wiseman bounded up and perched on a stool facing Gutierrez, a brassy woman in her early forties. "May I call you Richard?" she asked.

"You can call me what you want," Wiseman said.

"Dr. *Dick!* " she said. The audience whooped, and Wiseman offered a game smile. In a navy-blue T-shirt, khakis, and tortoise-rimmed glasses, with a Vandyke beard balancing his baldness, he looked like a particularly helpful store manager at the Gap. In fact, at the age of thirty-five, Wiseman—a professor at the University of Hertfordshire and the director of its Perrott-Warrick Research Unit—is Britain's most recognizable psychologist, famous for such mass-participation experiments as determining whether people can most easily detect lies told on television, on the radio, or in print. (It's on the radio.) Since last fall, he has been conducting a global humor study at LaughLab.co.uk, a Web site where visitors submit jokes and rate other people's jokes on a five-point scale called, somewhat unrigorously, the Giggleometer. When the experiment began, Wiseman posed for publicity photographs wearing a lab coat and holding a clipboard as he scrutinized a student wearing a chicken suit who was crossing a road. One photographer shouted, "Could the guy playing the scientist move to the left?," and Wiseman cried, "I *am* a scientist."

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The experiment was so popular—the LaughLab site got three million hits in the first five days—that Wiseman’s server blew out. He now has a repository of forty thousand jokes, some two-thirds of which are so racist, violent, or dirty that he can’t post them for the site’s visitors, a good number of whom, judging by their submissions (“What’s brown and sticky? A stick!” cropped up three hundred and fifty-three times), won’t be eligible for membership in the Friars Club for some years to come.

At the Ice House, Gutierrez read a Viagra joke and botched the punch line. Then it was Wiseman’s turn. He is not a joke-teller by nature, and his recital was almost apologetic: “Guy goes to the doctor, who gives him a checkup. ‘How long have I got to live, doc?’ ‘Ten.’ ‘Ten what? Weeks? Months?’ ‘Ten, nine, eight . . .’”

There are many ways that people laugh in a comedy club. There’s what you might call the Anticipator (“He just mentioned Monica Lewinsky! This’ll be great!”), the Clapper (“It’s about time someone called bin Laden a terrorist!”), the Aficionados’ Simper, the Coerced Snicker, the You-Crossed-the-Line “Ooh” (reserved for a Kennedy joke), the Gut Buster, and so forth. But there’s only one kind of silence.

Gutierrez, referring to her notes, tried a feeble sally about a preacher. Gloom settled over the room. So she put her script aside and barked, “Two faggots and a midget walk into a bar—” The audience cracked up for four long, joyous seconds. Comedians relish a two-second laugh; four seconds is standup gold.

Why, after a string of failed jokes, such a big laugh? It’s hard to say. Comedy theorists—philosophers, psychologists, comedy writers, and, most recently, neurologists—have yet to resolve even such seemingly simple questions as where knock-knock jokes come from, why you can’t tickle yourself, and whether any woman anywhere, ever, has appreciated the Three Stooges. Technically, Gutierrez’s remark wasn’t a joke but a setup to a joke, and a

hostile, slurring setup at that. In 1993, Robert R. Provine, a behavioral neuroscientist, conducted a study of laughter in social settings—basically, he eavesdropped at cocktail parties—and discovered that the biggest laugh-getters were not punch lines or bons mots but such you-had-to-be-there remarks as “I’ll see you guys later” and “Must be nice!” and “You just farted!”

In other words, something’s being “funny” is not an adequate explanation of laughter. Is humor a temperament or a talent? Is it innate and individual and evolutionarily adaptive, or learned and cultural and gloriously pointless? “What does laughter mean?” the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in 1901. “The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation.” Unfortunately, Aristotle’s treatise on laughter, which might have settled the whole matter, was lost to history.

Richard Wiseman told me that his own efforts to advance humor theory had begun almost in jest. “I was asked if I had any ideas for the government’s Science Year,” Wiseman said, “and I instantly thought, World’s funniest joke! With one sentence, you’ve sold the project. Of course, the idea of scientifically determining the world’s funniest joke is completely ridiculous. People thought we’d have a computer that would tell you ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’ is objectively a 4 on a scale of 5. And the point is that you can’t get a computer to do it—humor is a thoroughly human activity, and very, very hard to explain.”

And yet as Wiseman began combing through his site’s top two thousand jokes, preparing to announce his findings this fall, he was nagged by patterns. At times, comedy seems reminiscent of mathematics: as John Allen Paulos observed in his book “Mathematics and Humor,” both disciplines prize ingenuity, concision, literal-mindedness, and the use or misuse of logical

notions such as presupposition, disguised equivalence, non sequitur, and reductio ad absurdum. Wiseman found that joke themes kept recurring, too. “There seem to be only about four jokes that come up all the time,” he told me. “Someone trying to look clever and taking a pratfall. Husbands and wives not being loving. Doctors being insensitive about imminent death. And God making a mistake.

“We’ve learned one thing for sure, though,” he continued. “Comparing scores for the same joke with different animals inserted in it, we found that the funniest animal of all is a duck. So science has determined that, if you’re going to tell a talking-animal joke, make it a duck.”

How the body laughs is well understood. Amusement initiates the coördinated action of fifteen facial muscles, beginning with a lift of the eyebrows and a series of eye- and cheek-muscle contractions known as the “surprise response.” What follows are spasmotic skeletal muscle contractions, a quickened heartbeat, and rapid breathing. The diaphragm contracts in clonic movements that crescendo and then diminish. (The “ha ha ho ho he” laugh is common, but you never hear “ha ho ha ho ha” or “he ho he.”)

How the brain processes humor remains a mystery. It’s easy to make someone smile or cry by electronically stimulating a single region of the brain, but it’s astonishingly difficult to make someone laugh. The “laughter circuit” is complex and various. Puns are processed on the left side of the brain by gyri, bumpy areas on the surface of the cerebral cortex; more complex, non-wordplay jokes are routed through gyri on the right side of the brain and also trigger electronic activity in many other parts of the brain.

One way of thinking about this is that the left side of the brain cognitively “sets up” the joke and the right side emotionally “gets it.” In a 1981 paper in *Brain and Language*, the researchers Wendy Wapner, Suzanne Hamby, and Howard Gardner concluded that the

left hemisphere of the brain is a “highly efficient, but narrowly programmed linguistic computer; in contrast the right hemisphere constitutes a suitable audience for a humorous silent film.” They explained, “While the left hemisphere might appreciate some of Groucho’s puns, and the right hemisphere might be entertained by the antics of Harpo, only the two hemispheres united can appreciate a whole Marx Brothers routine.” Neither hemisphere, apparently, thinks much of Chico.

In the early sixties, Lenny Bruce inaugurated a routine that stunned audiences in San Francisco and New York clubs. One evening, Bruce’s short riff convulsed the crowd for an astounding seventeen seconds:

“If you’ve, er, [pause] ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me. Stop me if you’ve seen it. [Long pause] I’m going to piss on you.”

History’s first humor theory offers a compelling explanation for how Bruce’s joke worked. “Superiority theory” began with Plato and Aristotle, but Thomas Hobbes provided its first full explanation in “Leviathan,” published in 1651: laughter, he wrote, is provoked by the “sudden glory” attending a perception of one’s own mighty powers “or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another.” According to superiority theory, the audience loved Bruce’s joke because it identified with him, the swaggering aggressor—or, alternatively, because Bruce was suddenly revealed as beneath contempt. (Audiences have felt superior to the people who make them laugh since at least the Middle Ages, when dwarves and hunchbacks were used as court jesters. A 1976 study found that when subjects were asked to characterize American comedians, people often said “skinny,” “fat,” “ugly,” “clumsy,” “stupid,” “weird,” or “deformed.”)

“Incongruity theory,” the most widely accepted humor doctrine today, was born in the seventeenth century, when Blaise Pascal

wrote, “Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.” According to incongruity theory, in the joke “I went to my doctor for shingles—he sold me aluminum siding,” our (tiny) pleasure arises in two stages: surprise and then coherence. The seeming story line of the joke (the doctor will treat shingles, the disease) collapses, but we instantly realize that the anomaly can be explained by another story line (the doctor sells shingles, the product).

A few years ago, an Austrian psychologist and humor researcher named Willibald Ruch suggested that there is a third stage after the surprise and coherence stages. (Ruch is the president of an academic group called the International Society for Humor Studies; at the I.S.H.S.’s annual conference this summer, presentations included “One of the Last Vestiges of Gender Bias: The Characterization of Women Through the Telling of Dirty Jokes in ‘Ally McBeal’ ” and “Connection Between Sense of Humor and Well Being at Work of Finnish Police Officers.”) In this new wrinkle on incongruity theory, the third stage is “detecting that actually what makes sense . . . is pleasant nonsense,” that “the ability to ‘make sense,’ to solve problems, has been ‘misused’—and this feeling is generally associated with pleasure.” This third-stage realization, Ruch says, is what makes us laugh. Forty years ago, well before the advent of insult comics like Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay, we didn’t expect a comedian to suddenly and nonsensically threaten to piss on us, so incongruity theory offers a convincing explanation for the success of Lenny Bruce’s joke.

“Release theory,” which still has its adherents, holds that humor mines repressed sources of pleasure in the unconscious. Its leading proponent was Sigmund Freud, who, in “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” (1905), declared that jokes are our way of expressing otherwise taboo wishes (sleeping with your mother, killing your father, etc.). John Limon, in his recent book “Stand-Up

Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America,” suggested that comedy arises from “a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of . . . blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse.” Lenny Bruce’s aggressive peeing joke fits well with Freud’s notions, too.

Henri Bergson, a contemporary of Freud, proposed the related notion of machine theory to explain why something is funny. Bergson suggested that we laugh at other people’s rigidity, at the “mechanical encrusted on something living.” As the comedian Mike Myers observed in an e-mail to me, “Comedy characters tend to be a _____ machine; i.e., Clouseau was a *smug* machine, Pepe Le Pew was a *love* machine, Felix Unger was a *clean* machine, and Austin Powers is a *sex* machine.”

In recent years, evolutionary biologists have turned the focus from what makes us laugh to why we bother. The neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran, in “Phantoms in the Brain” (1998), written with Sandra Blakeslee, provided incongruity theory with a nifty evolutionary rationale. Ramachandran suggested that laughter occurs as a result of a spurious threat: the insular cortex signals something alarming and then the anterior cingulate gyrus, which detects incongruities, responds, “Don’t worry, no threat.” Ramachandran and Blakeslee write, “The main purpose of laughter might be to allow the individual to alert others in the social group (usually kin) that the detected anomaly is trivial, nothing to worry about.”

Because most of these theories apply equally well to Lenny Bruce’s joke and to many other comic situations—and therefore equally badly—a few eccentrics have chosen to chart their own paths. The most famous of the rogue explorers is Del Close, a mentor to John Goodman, John Goodman, Bill Murray, and Mike Myers. Close co-founded Chicago’s ImprovOlympic, a theatre for sketch artists, and he and his creative partner, Charna Halpern, devised the influential long-form group-improvisational technique known as “the Harold.”

Close also dreamed up the comedy-sketch program “Second City TV,” ran light shows for the Grateful Dead, and smoked a truly staggering amount of pot. He died of emphysema in 1999, at the age of sixty-four.

A few months ago, I went to Chicago to take a look at Close’s notebook, which contained an attempt at a unifying theory. I met Charna Halpern at the ImprovOlympic, where she still trains comedic actors, down the street from Wrigley Field. We sat in the empty theatre and discussed Close’s insight into why comedy relies on patterns of three. There is a long-standing tradition—Leo McCarey, who directed the early Laurel and Hardy films, called it “almost an unwritten rule”—that jokes work best when there are two straightforward examples, to establish a pattern, and then a third, to shatter it. (“My favorite books are ‘Moby-Dick,’ ‘Great Expectations,’ and ‘Rock Hard Abs in Thirty Days.’ ”) The “rule of three” also holds that a running gag should be called back three times. The joke begins losing its savor the fourth time (and then, according to “comedy torture theory,” becomes funny again about the seventh time, as the audience realizes that the performer is being deliberately exasperating).

“Del’s theory was that we have three brains,” Halpern said. “The joke is got first by our reptile brain, which appreciates slapstick, then by our mammalian brain,” which, Close believed, handles wants and needs. (The few documented instances of animal humor are physical in nature. The researcher Roger Fouts reported in 1997 that Washoe, a chimpanzee he had taught to sign, once urinated on him while riding on his shoulders, then signed “Funny”—touching its nose—and snorted.) Finally, Halpern continued, “the joke reaches the human neocortex,” which, in Close’s view, was in charge of manners and customs. “By the time the neocortex gets it, it’s hilarious.” She shrugged. “Del might have been kidding—he might have just been high.”

Halpern handed me one of Close's battered composition books. Inside were diagrams for a new kind of camera lens, a poem-play about Dwight Eisenhower and Ulysses Grant, and, boldly scrawled in green Magic Marker, "A 'Concise' Theory of Improvisational Theory." It was worrisome to see that "theory" was repeated and that "concise" was in quotation marks. Setting out rules for improvisation also seemed somewhat contradictory—one of those self-undermining statements which are a comedy staple (the shouted command to "Relax!," for instance, or Polonius' assertion, in the midst of an endless speech, that "brevity is the soul of wit").

Close began confidently, developing his idea that theatre is play, and that play can therefore rise to the status of theatre:

1. All human interactions—simple or complex—*may* be analyzed in terms of *games*—(von Neumann, et al.), "A Theory of Games," decision theory, queuing theory, etc. on the mathematical side & Eric Berne & similar work on the psychological side. . . .
4. The further a game is *abstracted* from behavior, the easier it is to recognize it as a *game*. (Chess is difficult to confuse with warfare, but Boxing is hard to distinguish from a Brawl.)

But when he shifted to a black marker, and then another, heavier black marker—at about the point that he began trying to explain why, in James Bond films, the games of cards or golf are the best parts—his syllogisms began to wander. They soon stopped altogether. "The above logic is *facile*," Close concluded, trying to write himself out of the muddle, "but not specious."

Other people's comedy theories are often inadvertently funny, in the same way that other people's physical pain and embarrassment are funny. Mel Brooks illuminated this problem when he defined tragedy and comedy: "Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die." With similarly blithe

hostility, standup comedians talk about “cracking up” or “breaking up” the audience with “punch” lines, and equate success onstage with “killing.” Monty Python did a sketch once about the world’s funniest joke, which is so sidesplitting that it kills all who hear it. In the sketch, the joke is translated and shouted, devastatingly, against the Germans in the Second World War: “Wenn ist das Nunstruck git und Slotermeyer? Ja! . . . Beiherhund das Oder die Flipperwaldt gersput!” That sounds funny, and has the rhythm of a killer joke, but aside from a few actual German words it’s nonsense.

Though Del Close never quite worked out all the details, he was convinced that laughter is related to our fear of death. In an e-mail, Mike Myers wrote, “Del Close said that there is very little difference between the realizations ‘a-ha we are going to die,’ and our laughter, which is ‘ha-ha’—he would say that ‘ha-ha’ and ‘a-ha’ are related industries.” Close’s final words were “I’m tired of being the funniest one in the room.” He willed his skull to Chicago’s Goodman Theatre, where it sits in an acrylic box, intended for use in a future production of “Hamlet.”

The University of Hertfordshire is a sprawling brown brick facility in Hatfield, a quiet town half an hour north of London. In the windowless core of the university’s Perrott-Warrick Research Unit, which Richard Wiseman runs, is a small computer-server room that contains two loudly humming Macintosh G-4 computers, which, in turn, contain LaughLab. Wiseman has been spending a lot of his time in this room. One afternoon a few months ago, Dr. Jed Everitt, a physicist who wrote LaughLab’s software, and who vets jokes for acceptability, brought up the most recently submitted jokes on one G-4, and Wiseman read over his shoulder. “ ‘What do you call a blonde with pigtails? A blow job with handlebars.’ ‘Blonde’ is misspelled.”

“It’s not going on,” Everitt said.

“The sad thing is, these people have the vote,” Wiseman said.

“What I really like is when they explain the joke at the end,” Everitt said.

“And when jokes come in from Sweden and Denmark people often write ‘Hee hee hee’ afterward. It seems to be a Scandinavian thing.” Wiseman scrolled down. “Not on, not on, not on—most of the jokes won’t make it. Some unfamiliar American terms get past —Oh, fine, let the beaver joke through—but, as it’s for the government’s Science Year, we replace ‘a Pole’ or ‘a Belgian’ in the ethnic jokes with ‘an idiot.’ The criticism we hear, and I totally agree, is ‘You’re taking out the best material!’ ”

In February, Wiseman was confounded when his site was flooded by more than three thousand different jokes from America, all featuring the same punch line. It turned out that the syndicated columnist Dave Barry had written a column riffing on Wiseman’s interim report on his results, which noted, as Barry put it, that “women don’t like jokes that involve aggression, sexuality, or offensiveness—also known as ‘the three building blocks of humor.’ ” To improve the over-all joke quality, Barry asked his readers to submit to LaughLab jokes containing the phrase “there’s a weasel chomping on my privates”—a line that incorporates aggression, sexuality, and offensiveness, at least to weasels. Because Barry also asked his readers to rate their fellow-readers’ weasel jokes highly, one weasel zinger wound up as LaughLab’s sixth-funniest entry.

This is just one of the methodological impurities that make Wiseman’s study more suggestive than definitive, as he freely acknowledged. “Most science is top down,” Wiseman said. “You start with a hypothesis and try to prove it. LaughLab is bottom up: we’re driven by what people give us. Masses of people come to the site, bother to type their jokes in, misspell most of the words, fuck up the punch line, and proudly submit it. Let’s hear it!”

For a long time, the leading joke was the old groaner about Holmes and Watson going camping. (The punch line is “Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!”) “It’s a terrible joke,” Wiseman said. “When we measure the ‘funniest’ joke as the one that gets the most 4 and 5 ratings, it’s going to be one that most people think is sort of O.K.—and not one that many people find hilarious. So our funniest joke is really going to be the least objectionable funnyish joke.”

Another problem, from Wiseman’s point of view, is that the country that finds LaughLab’s jokes funniest is Germany. “Either Germans do have a very good sense of humor, after all,” he said, doubtfully, “or there’s not much funny happening in Germany, so any joke at all is seen as absolutely hilarious. Also, if you like LaughLab’s jokes, it may not say much for your sense of humor.”

It’s not surprising that Wiseman’s explanations slight the Germans, for humor analysis is as jingoistic as humor itself. Numerous “social-identity theory” studies have shown that the more jokes esteem a subject’s own group and disparage alien groups, the funnier they are. Humor is often a means of saying, “We’re civilized and you’re not; we’re human and you’re not.” In “An Essay on Comedy,” written in 1877, the English novelist George Meredith claimed that refined humor flourishes only in societies with sexual equality, such as—ahem—Victorian England. “Where the veil is over women’s faces,” he wrote, “you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. Arabs in this respect are worse than Italians—much worse than Germans.”

Wiseman has one top-down hunch he’d like to prove. “We have some questions on the site designed to measure activity in the frontal lobe, the part of the brain involved with flexible thinking,” he said. “We ask people to do an estimation task, such as ‘Roughly how many words are on a page of a book?’ The people who produce wild estimates—thousands of words!—have very bad

flexible-thinking skills. One of their favorite jokes is ‘What’s pink and fluffy? Pink fluff.’ Whereas those who correctly guess ‘under five hundred words’ like conceptually difficult jokes. We’re hoping the final results will enable us to say something science-y, like ‘The frontal lobe explains why Germans like a certain kind of joke, explains the difference between men and women—men are more flexible thinkers—blah blah blah.’ ”

When scientists begin to diagram comedy, most comedians and comedy writers respond by saying, essentially, “Move along. Nothing to see here.” Comedy is more art than science, its practitioners believe, and it’s an art created not according to algorithms or invariant laws but in flashes of intuition fuelled by potato chips. In the late nineteen-eighties, before Conan O’Brien became a talk-show host, he wrote for “Saturday Night Live.” His colleague Greg Daniels (who went on to co-create “King of the Hill”) would often scribble pointers from Jim Downey, the show’s producer, on scraps of paper. O’Brien offered an instructive rhyme of his own: “When you overthink, you start to stink.”

Yet comedians have very definite ideas about specific techniques and scenarios that “work”—one of them being specificity itself. A joke is funnier if you say “Tropicana” rather than “orange juice.” Other rules of thumb are that the punch line or “reveal word” of a joke should come last, and that you weaken a joke if you gussy it up with too much distracting whimsy, an error sometimes referred to as “frosting the flake” or “stacking the wack.” So if you take the comedian Emo Philips’s joke “I’d like to die in my sleep like my grandfather did, not screaming at the top of my lungs like the passengers in his car,” it would be stacking the wack to make the punch line “like the passengers in his rented lime-green Yugo.”

One of the oldest comedy dynamics is having a fuddy-duddy driven berserk by an impulsive child (Hera and Zeus; Mr. Mooney and Lucy). Sitcoms are rife with such formulas. “TVLand to Go,” a book by Tim Hill, lists twenty-nine devices, including the slow

burn, the spit take, “digging the hole deeper” (a man says his girlfriend’s sister is “hot,” explains that he meant she looks hot, in the warm weather, and goes on to say, “If she’s hot, she shouldn’t wear a sweater . . . ,” and so forth), and the “whee wohn”—the use of editing, sometimes punctuated by a wacky sound effect, to create comic transitions (Man: “You’ll never see *me* in a dress!” Smash cut to the man in a gown: “Does this make my ass look fat?”).

Certain numbers are held to be wittier or more ludicrous than others: seventeen is generally considered pretty amusing, as are most primes, but the writers for Sid Caesar’s “Your Show of Shows” believed that the funniest number was thirty-two. And many offbeat words have a comic valence. Woody Allen has relied on “feathers,” “herring,” “butter,” and “dwarf”; Mel Brooks is fond of “nectarine” and “Saran Wrap.” In the book “Comedy Techniques for Writers & Performers,” Melvin Helitzer maintains that among the funniest names are Gladys, Chuck, José, Hortense, and Lucky Pierre; that funny occupations include kamikaze, layman, and beggar; and that the funniest word in food is a Twinkie.

In Neil Simon’s play “The Sunshine Boys,” an old vaudevillian, Willie, says:

“Alka Seltzer is funny. You say ‘Alka Seltzer’ and you get a laugh. . . . Fifty-seven years I’m in this business, you learn a few things. . . . Words with a ‘K’ in it are funny. . . . Cupcake is funny. Tomato is *not* funny. . . . Casey Stengel, that’s a funny name; Robert Taylor is not funny.”

The power of “k” has become comedy lore. The book “Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy,” by Greg Dean, asserts, “Hard consonant sounds, especially K sounds, which include hard C, Qu, and, to a lesser extent, T, P, hard G, D and B, tend to make words sound funnier.” The comic Wendy Liebman told me that she’s always trying to write a joke that ends with “kayak.” (Many ethnic

slurs used in jokes are “k” words: “spic,” “mick,” “chink,” “kike,” and “Polack,” for instance.)

Neil Simon is distressed that his monologue spawned such a hard-and-fast rule, believing that true comedy emerges from character. “Tricks like that are for beginners,” he says. “It’s like assessing a great football player by the way he laces up his shoes.” When I visited Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show,” in his office recently, he echoed Simon’s complaint. “There isn’t any insider’s formula of ‘sexual reference plus Jew plus “k-word” equals funny,’ ” he said.

“And, anyway, didn’t Milton Berle die with all the comedy secrets?” Stewart’s head writer, Ben Karlin, asked. He was referring to the late comedian’s files, which contained more than six million jokes.

“Yes, but he didn’t actually know them,” Stewart said. “They were in a small metal chest in his cock.” It’s worth noting that that joke contains a sexual reference (Berle’s legendarily large penis), a Jew (Berle), and a “k-word” punch line (“cock”).

In 1991, Brent Forrester was working as an extra at Universal Studios, playing such roles as the hobo who is briefly seen warming his hands over a flaming trash can on the show “Quantum Leap.” He decided that he would be happier as a highly paid television comedy writer. There was only one problem: he wasn’t funny. So Forrester sat in his apartment in South Central Los Angeles and watched endless episodes of “The Simpsons,” “Roseanne,” and “Major Dad,” writing down the routines that worked particularly well and identifying the “humor mechanisms” that underlay them. He determined that there were five. “The first is wordplay,” says Forrester, a genial, sandy-haired man who went on to get a job writing for “The Simpsons” and to punch up such movie scripts as “Liar, Liar” and “Office Space.” A common type of wordplay is “literalization”: a character asks a rhetorical

question like “What kind of idiot do you think I am?” and someone pipes up, “A big, fat idiot?”

“Wordplay alone is usually not funny,” Forrester says. “It needs to be combined with another mechanism.” Wordplay meets certain preconditions of humor: it is surprising, and it hinges on a soluble incongruity. But the problem with puns, riddles, malapropisms, spoonerisms, Wellerisms, and Tom Swifties is that once our brains complete a left-brain homonym match we grasp the trick of the joke. With a more complex joke that lights up the whole brain, you can’t decipher how it works, or why it’s funny. A pun is pure technique; to emotionally engage someone in a joke—to get a laugh—you also need a funny theme.

Fortunately, Forrester identified a number of those, too. “The second humor mechanism is comic irony,” Forrester said. “For instance, attempting to plug the leak, you make a bigger hole. And it’s funnier if you’re pleased with your initial effort: ‘Aha! I’ve plugged the leak!’ The third is combining the sacred and the profane—the incongruous juxtaposition. A nun sits on the toilet, or a baby has a machine gun. The fourth is a reversal of scale—a little guy in a tiny VW drives into your feet.

“And the fifth,” he continued, “is the unintentional revelation of something negative—trying to look classy, Homer lights his cigar with a discount coupon from a car wash. A lame joke has one mechanism: you see an old man with a Mohawk haircut. A brilliant joke always combines three mechanisms.” In one “Simpsons” episode, the staff needed a gag for a sequence in which the murderous Sideshow Bob was chasing Bart. Forrester suggested that Bart duck into an office, praying, “Please, God, don’t let him find me!” as he hid behind a water cooler, which magnified his head to twice its size. “That’s a combination of comic irony and absurd reversal of scale, with the prayer thrown in to add the sacred/profane element,” Forrester said. “I knew the joke couldn’t

fail!” (Somehow, it did: in the show’s final version, another gag was used.)

Emboldened, Forrester began to blend temporal and physiological considerations into his Weltanschauung. When he worked on “King of the Hill,” in the late nineties, he assembled a three-ring binder labelled “Writing Theory,” which now sits on a shelf in the office of the show’s co-creator, Greg Daniels. Using the backs of discarded script pages, Forrester sketched out a “Humor & Duration Principle”:

J/T = F [where J is Joke, T is Time, and F is Funny; the less time you take to tell a joke, the funnier it is].

Daniels added “Steam Theory,” which was illustrated by two boiling pots. One, uncovered, is releasing small “heh”s. The other, with a lid, gives off a single “HA!” “A lot of shows put jokes in every single line, and that dissipates,” Daniels says. “Whereas if you tell only one big joke, and don’t try to be funny en route, you can get a big laugh.” He insists, “This has a physiological basis!” and adds, in a smaller voice, “Probably.”

The show’s other writers filled the book with theories of a less serious nature, including:

J/PS varies inversely as BS/J [as Penis Size decreases, joke becomes funnier; as Boob Size increases, the same is true].

If HN, then SV [if hit in the nuts, then squeaky voice].

F Sound = Funny; F Smell = Not Funny [where F is Fart].

Cream π / Face = J^2

Such rules, which seem delightful at 2 a.m. in the writing room, would in most other contexts elicit bewilderment. W. F. Fry, Jr., and Gregory Bateson suggested that jokes work within a “play frame”

denoted by a setup or a metacue, which announces, “I am going to relate something funny.” Standard metacues include the raised eyebrow, the “Heard the one about?” preamble, and the clipped, article-dropping heightened style of speech (“Man walks into a bar. Bartender says . . .”). If, without a metacue, you told your physician, “If HN, then SV,” he’d probably point out that most men who receive a blow to the testicles do not then speak in a high-pitched voice. Jokes also require the right audience. When I mentioned “If HN, then SV” to Jon Stewart, he laughed. Then he said, “But perform it in front of the castrati, and they get *very* angry.”

When Richard Wiseman analyzed the LaughLab data, he was dismayed to discover that there was no correlation at all between his respondents’ flexible-thinking skills and their nationalities or genders. His science-y hypothesis that Germans and women like simple jokes because their frontal lobes are relatively puny went nowhere, like a setup without a punch line.

His contest to determine the world’s funniest joke was more satisfying. The Holmes-Watson-tent bit was finally overtaken by a joke submitted by a psychiatrist from Manchester, who often tells it to cheer up his patients. Fifty-seven per cent of LaughLab’s voters rated it a 4 or a 5:

A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn’t seem to be breathing, his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator, “My friend is dead! What can I do?” The operator, in a calm soothing voice, says, “Just take it easy. I can help. First, let’s make sure he’s dead.” There is a silence, then a shot is heard. The guy’s voice comes back on the line. He says, “O.K., now what?”

On October 3rd, Wiseman called a press conference in Covent Garden. One of his students, wearing a chicken suit, unveiled a poster with the joke written on it and stood beside it, making goofy, chickenlike gestures. Afterward, Wiseman told me that he was delighted with the winning entry, as it was so neatly explained by history's three favorite comedy theories. "We feel superior to the stupid hunter," he said. "We appreciate the incongruity of him misunderstanding the operator, and the joke also helps us to laugh about our concerns about our own mortality." The gratuitous inclusion of "New Jersey" was also, clearly, a shrewd play for the American vote, tapping social-identity scorn for the Garden State.

But any analysis of the joke remains unsatisfying. Seeking a thoroughgoing explanation for humor is like seeking the Fountain of Youth, or the Philosopher's Stone—it is a quest not for a tangible goal but for a beguiling idea. That idea, in this case, is to perfectly understand our illogical selves by understanding the most illogical thing that we do. What sometimes makes us giggle at funerals? Theories and brain maps abound, but no one really understands why we laugh when we do. ♦



Tad Friend has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the memoir “[In the Early Times: A Life Reframed](#).”

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Dead Man Laughing

Jokes run through a family.

By [Zadie Smith](#)

December 14, 2008



We knew the "Dead Parrot" sketch by heart. We had the usual religious feeling for "Monty Python's Life of Brian."

Illustration by David Hughes

My father had few enthusiasms, but he loved comedy. He was a comedy nerd, though this is so common a condition in Britain as to be almost not worth mentioning. Like most Britons, Harvey

gathered his family around the defunct hearth each night to watch the same half-hour comic situations repeatedly, in reruns and on video. We knew the “Dead Parrot” sketch by heart. We had the usual religious feeling for “Monty Python’s Life of Brian.” If we were notable in any way, it was not in kind but in extent. In our wood-cabinet music center, comedy records outnumbered the Beatles. The Goons’ “I’m Walking Backward for Christmas” got an airing all year long. We liked to think of ourselves as particular, on guard against slapstick’s easy laughs—Benny Hill was beneath our collective consideration. I suppose the more precise term is “comedy snobs.”

Left unchecked, comedy snobbery can squeeze the joy out of the enterprise. You end up thinking of comedy as Hemingway thought of narrative: structured like an iceberg, with all the greater satisfactions fathoms under water, while the surface pleasure of the joke is somehow the least of it. In my father, this tendency was especially pronounced. He objected to joke merchants. He was wary of the revue-style bonhomie of the popular TV double act Morecambe and Wise, and disapproved of the cheery bawdiness of their rivals, the Two Ronnies. He was allergic to racial and sexual humor, to a far greater degree than any of the actual black people or women in his immediate family. Harvey’s idea of a good time was the BBC sitcom “Steptoe and Son,” the grim tale of two mutually antagonistic “rag-and-bone men” who pass their days in a Beckettian pile of rubbish, tearing psychological strips off each other. Each episode ends with the son (a philosopher manqué, who considers himself trapped in the filthy family business) submitting to a funk of existential despair. The sadder and more desolate the comedy, the better Harvey liked it.

His favorite was Tony Hancock, a comic wedded to despair, in his life as much as in his work. (Hancock died of an overdose in 1968.) Harvey had him on vinyl: a pristine, twenty-year-old set of LPs. The series was “Hancock’s Half Hour,” a situation comedy in

which Hancock plays a broad version of himself and, to my mind, of my father. A quintessentially English, poorly educated, working-class war veteran with social and intellectual aspirations, whose fictional address—23 Railway Cuttings, East Cheam—perfectly conjures the aspirant bleakness of London’s suburbs (as if Cheam were significant enough a spot to have an East). Harvey, meanwhile, could be found in 24 Athelstan Gardens, Willesden Green (a poky housing estate named after the ancient king of England), also by a railway. Hancock’s heartbreakingly unable to pass as a middle-class beatnik or otherwise pull himself out of the hole he was born in was a source of great mirth to Harvey, despite the fact that this was precisely his own situation. He loved Hancock’s hopefulness, and loved the way he was always disappointed. He passed this love on to his children, with the result that we inherited the comic tastes of a previous generation. (Born in 1925, Harvey was old enough to be our grandfather.)

Occasionally, I’d lure friends to my room and make them listen to “The Blood Donor” or “The Radio Ham.” This never went well. I demanded complete silence, was in the habit of lifting the stylus and replaying a section if any incidental noise should muffle a line, and generally leached all potential pleasure from the exercise with laborious explanations of the humor and said humor’s possible obfuscation by period details: ration books, shillings and farthings, coins for the meter, and so on. It was a hard sell in the brave new comedic world of “The Jerk” and “Beverly Hills Cop” and “Ghostbusters.”

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Hancock wasn’t such an anachronism, as it turns out. Genealogically speaking, Harvey had his finger on the pulse of British comedy, for Hancock begot Basil Fawlty, and Fawlty begot Alan Partridge, and Partridge begot the immortal David Brent. And

Hancock and his descendants served as a constant source of conversation between my father and me, a vital link between us when, class-wise, and in every other wise, each year placed us farther apart. As in many British families, it was university wot dunnit. When I returned home from my first term at Cambridge, we couldn't discuss the things I'd learned, about Anna Karenina, or G. E. Moore, or Gawain and his staggeringly boring Green Knight, because Harvey had never learned them—but we could always speak of Basil. It was a conversation that lasted decades, well beyond the twelve episodes in which Basil himself is contained. The episodes were merely jumping-off points; we carried on compulsively creating Basil long after his authors had stopped. Great situation comedy expands in the imagination. For my generation, never having seen David Brent's apartment in "The Office" is no obstacle to conjuring up his interior decoration: the risqué Athena poster, the gigantic entertainment system, the comical fridge magnets. Similarly, for my father, imagining Basil Fawlty's school career was a creative exercise. "He would have failed his eleven-plus," Harvey once explained to me. "And that would've been the start of the trouble." When meditating on the sitcom, you extrapolate from the details, which in Britain are almost always signifiers of social class: Hancock's battered homburg, Fawlty's cravat, Partridge's driving gloves, Brent's fake Italian suits. It's a relief to be able to laugh at these things. In British comedy, the painful class dividers of real life are neutralized and exposed. In my family, at least, it was a way of talking about things we didn't want to talk about.

When Harvey was very ill, in the autumn of 2006, I went to visit him at a nursing home in the seaside town of Felixstowe, armed with the DVD boxed set of "Fawlty Towers." By this point, he was long divorced from my mother, his second divorce, and was living alone on the gray East Anglian coast, far from his children. A dialysis patient for a decade (he lost his first kidney to stones, the second to cancer), his body now began to give up. I had meant to

leave the DVDs with him, something for the empty hours alone, but when I got there, with nothing to talk about, we ended up watching them together for the umpteenth time, he on the single chair, me on the floor, cramped in that grim little nursing-home bedroom, surely the least funny place he'd ever found himself in—with the possible exception of the 1944 Normandy landings. We watched several episodes, back to back. We laughed. Never more than when Basil thrashed an Austin 1100 with the branch of a tree, an act of inspired pointlessness that seemed analogous to our own situation. And then we watched the DVD extras, in which we found an illuminating little depth charge hidden among the nostalgia and the bloopers:

It was probably—may have been—my idea that she should be a bit less posh than him, because we couldn't see otherwise what would have attracted them to each other. I have a sort of vision of her family being in catering on the south coast, you know, and her working behind a bar somewhere, he being demobbed from his national service and getting his gratuity, you know, and going in for a drink and this . . . barmaid behind the bar and she fancied him because he was so posh. And they sort of thought they'd get married and run a hotel together and it was all a bit sort of romantic and idealistic, and the grim reality then caught up with them.

That is the actress Prunella Scales answering a question of comic (and class) motivation that had troubled my father for twenty years: why on earth did they marry each other? A question that—given his own late, failed marriage to a Jamaican girl less than half his age—must have had a resonance beyond the laugh track. On finally hearing an answer, he gave a sigh of comedy-snob satisfaction. Not long after my visit, Harvey died, at the age of eighty-one. He had told me that he wanted “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” played at his funeral. When the day came, I managed to remember that. I forgot which version, though (sweet, melodic Baez). What he got

instead was jeering, post-breakup Dylan, which made it seem as if my mild-mannered father had gathered his friends and family with the particular aim of telling them all to fuck off from beyond the grave. As comedy, this would have raised a half smile out of Harvey, not much more. It was a little broad for his tastes.

In birth, two people go into a room and three come out. In death, one person goes in and none come out. This is a cosmic joke told by Martin Amis. I like the metaphysical absurdity it draws out of the death event, the sense that death doesn't happen at all—that it is, in fact, the opposite of a happening. There are philosophers who take this joke seriously. To their way of thinking, the only option in the face of death—in facing death's absurd non-face—is to laugh. This is not the bold, humorless laugh of the triumphant atheist, who conquers what he calls death and his own fear of it. No: this is more unhinged. It comes from the powerless, despairing realization that death cannot be conquered, defied, contemplated, or even approached, because it's not there; it's only a word, signifying nothing. It's a truly funny laugh, of the laugh-or-you'll-cry variety. There is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us!" This is a cosmic joke told by Franz Kafka, a wisecrack projected into a void. When I first put the partial cremains of my father in a Tupperware sandwich box and placed it on my writing desk, that was the joke I felt like telling.

Conversely, the death we speak of and deal with every day, the death that is full of meaning, the non-absurd death, this is a place-marker, a fake, a convenient substitute. It was this sort of death that I was determined to press upon my father, as he did his dying. In my version, Harvey was dying meaningfully, in linear fashion, within a scenario stage-managed and scripted by the people around him. Neatly crafted, like an American sitcom: "The One in Which My Father Dies." It was to conclude with a real event called Death, which he would *experience* and for which he would be ready. I did all the usual, banal things. I brought a Dictaphone to his bedside, in

order to collect the narrative of his life (this perplexed him—he couldn't see the through line). I grew furious with overworked nurses. I refused to countenance any morbidity from my father, or any despair. The funniest thing about dying is how much we, the living, ask of the dying; how we beg them to make it easy on us. At the hospital, I ingratiated myself with the doctors and threw what the British call “new money” at the situation. Harvey watched me go about my business with a puzzled half smile. To all my eager suggestions he said, “Yes, dear—if you like,” for he knew well that we were dealing with the National Health Service, into which all Smiths are born and die, and my new money would mean only that exactly the same staff, in the same hospital, would administer the same treatments, though in a slightly nicer room, with a window and possibly a television. He left me to my own devices, sensing that these things made a difference to me, though they made none to him: “Yes, dear—if you like.” I was still thrashing an Austin 1100 with a tree branch; he was some way beyond that. And then, when he was truly beyond it, far out on the other side of nowhere, a nurse offered me the opportunity to see the body, which I refused. That was a mistake. It left me suspended in a bad joke in which a living man inexplicably becomes two pints of dust and everyone acts as if this were not a joke at all but, rather, the most reasonable thing in the world. A body would have been usefully, concretely absurd. I would have known—or so people say—that the thing lying there on the slab wasn’t my father. As it was, I missed the death, I missed the body, I got the dust, and from these facts I tried to extrapolate a story, as writers will, but found myself, instead, in a kind of stasis. A moment in which nothing happened, and keeps not happening, forever. Later, I was informed, by way of comfort, that Harvey had also missed his death: he was in the middle of a sentence, joking with his nurse. “He didn’t even know what hit him!” the head matron said, which was funny, too, because who the hell does?

Proximity to death inspired the manic spirit of *carpe diem* in the Smiths. After Harvey died, my mother met a younger man in Africa and married him. The younger of my two brothers, Luke, went to Atlanta to pursue dreams of rap stardom. Both decisions sounded like promising pilot episodes for new sitcoms. And then I tried to ring in the changes, by moving to Italy. In my empty kitchen, on the eve of leaving the country, I put my finger in the dust of my father and put the dust into my mouth and swallowed it, and there was something very funny about that—I laughed as I did it. After that, it felt as if I didn’t laugh again for a long time. Or do much of anything. Imagined worlds moved quite out of my reach, seemed utterly pointless, not to mention a colossal human presumption: “Yes, dear—if you like.” For two years in Rome, I looked from blank computer screen to handful of dust and back again—a scenario that no one, even in Britain, could turn into a sitcom. Then, as I was preparing to leave Italy, Ben, my other brother, rang with his news. He wanted me to know that he had broken with our long-standing family tradition of passive comedy appreciation. He had decided to become a comedian.

It turns out that becoming a comedian is an act of instantaneous self-creation. There are no intermediaries blocking your way, no gallerists, publishers, or distributors. Social class is a non-issue; you do not have to pass your eleven-plus. In a sense, it would have been a good career for our father, a creative man whose frequent attempts at advancement were forever thwarted, or so he felt, by his accent and his background, his lack of education, connections, luck. Of course, Harvey wasn’t, in himself, *funny*—but you don’t always have to be. In the world of comedy, if you are absolutely determined to stand on a stage for five minutes with a mike in your hand, someone in London will let you do it, if only once. Ben was determined: he’d given up the after-school youth group he had, till then, managed; he’d written material; he had tickets for me, my mother, my aunt. It was my private opinion that he’d had a minor nervous breakdown of some kind, a delayed reaction to his

bereavement. I acted pleased, bought a plane ticket, flew over. We had been tight as thieves as children, but I'd barely seen him since Harvey died, and I sensed us settling into the attenuated relations of adult siblings, a new formal distance, always slightly abashed, for there seems no clear way, in adult life, to do justice to the intimacy of childhood. I remember being scandalized, as a child, at how rarely our parents spoke to *their* siblings. How was it possible? How did it happen? Then it happens to you. Thinking of him standing up there alone with a microphone, though, trying to be *funny*, I felt a renewed, Siamese-twin closeness: fearing for him was like fearing for me. I've never been able to bear watching anyone die onstage, never mind a blood relative. If he'd told me that it was major heart surgery he was about to have, on this makeshift stage in the tiny, dark basement of a London pub, I couldn't have been more sick about it.

It was a mixed bill. Before Ben, two men and two women performed a mildewed sketch show of unmistakable Oxbridge vintage, circa 1994. A certain brittle poshness informed their exaggerated portraits of high-strung secretaries, neurotic piano teachers, absent-minded professors. They put on mustaches and wigs and walked in and out of imaginary scenarios where fewer and fewer funny things occurred. It was the comedy of things past. The girls, though dressed as girls, were no longer girls, and the boys had paunches and bald spots; the faintest trace of ancient intracomedy-troupe love affairs clung to them sadly; all the promising meetings with the BBC had come and gone. This was being done out of pure friendship now, or the memory of friendship. As I watched the unspooling horror of it, a repressed, traumatic memory resurfaced, of an audition, one that must have taken place around the time this comedy troupe was formed, very likely in the same town. This audition took the form of a breakfast meeting, a "chat about comedy" with two young men, then members of the Cambridge Footlights, now a popular British TV double act. I don't remember what it was that I said. I remember

only strained smiles, the silent consumption of scrambled eggs, a feeling of human free fall. And the conclusion, which was obvious to us all. Despite having spent years at the grindstone of comedy appreciation, I wasn't funny. Not even slightly.

And now the compère was calling my brother's name. He stepped out. I felt a great wash of East Anglian fatalism, my father's trademark, pass over to me, its new custodian. Ben was dressed in his usual urban streetwear, the only black man in the room. I began peeling the label off my beer bottle. I sensed at once the way he was going to play it, the same way we had played it throughout our childhood—a few degrees off whatever it was that people expected of us, when they looked at us. This evening, that strategy took the form of an opening song about the Olympics, with particular attention paid to equestrian dressage. It was funny! He was getting laughs. He pushed steadily forward, a slow, gloomy delivery that owed something to Harvey's seemingly infinite pessimism. *No good can come of this.* This had been Harvey's reaction to all news, no matter how objectively good that news might be, from the historic entrance of a Smith child into an actual university to the birthing of babies and the winning of prizes. When he became ill, he took a perversely British satisfaction in the diagnosis of cancer: absolutely nothing good could come of this, and the certainty of it seemed almost to calm him.

I waited, like my father, for the slipup, the flat joke. It didn't come. Ben did a minute on hip-hop, a minute on his baby daughter, a minute on his freshly minted standup career. Another song. I was still laughing, and so was everyone else. Finally, I felt able to look up from the beer mats to the stage. Up there I saw my brother, who is not eight, as I forever expect him to be, but thirty, and who appeared completely relaxed, as if born with mike in hand. And then it was over—no one had died.

The next time I saw Ben do standup was about ten gigs later, at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. He didn't exactly die the night I

turned up, but he was badly wounded. It was a shock to him, because it was the first time. In comedy terms, his cherry got popped. At first, he couldn't see why: it was the same type of venue he'd been doing in London—intimate, drunken—and, by and large, it was the same material. Why, this time, were the laughs smaller? Why, for one good joke in particular, did they not occur at all? We repaired to the bar to regroup, with all the other comedians doing the same. In comedy, the analysis of death, or near-death, experiences is a clear, unsentimental process. The discussion is technical, closer to a musician's self-analysis than to a writer's: this note was off; you missed the beat there. I knew I could say to Ben, honestly, and without fear of hurting him, "It was the pause—you went too slowly on the punch line," and he could say, "Yep," and the next night the pause would be shortened, the punch line would hit its mark. We ordered more beer. "The thing I don't understand—I don't understand what happened with the new material. I thought it was good, but . . ." Another comedian, who was also ordering beer, chipped in, "Did you do it first?" "Yes." "Don't do the new stuff first. Do it last. Just because you're excited by it doesn't mean it should go first. It's not ready yet."

We drank a lot, with a lot of very drunk comedians, until very late. Trying to keep up with the wisecracks and the complaints, I felt as if I'd arrived late to a battleground that had seen bloody action. The comedians had the aura of survivors, speaking the language of mutual, hard experience: venues too hot and too small, the horror of empty seats, who got nominated for what, who'd been reviewed well or badly, and, of course, the financial pain. (Some Edinburgh performers break even, most incur debts, and almost no one makes a profit.) It was strange to see my brother, previously a member of my family, becoming a member of *this* family, all his previous concerns and principles subsumed, like theirs, into one simple but demanding question: *Is it funny?* And that's another reason to envy comedians: when they look at a blank page, they always know, at least, the question they need to ask themselves. I think the clarity of

their aim accounts for a striking phenomenon, peculiar to comedy: the possibility of extremely rapid improvement. Comedy is a Lazarus art; you can die onstage and then rise again. It's not unusual to see a mediocre young standup in January and, seeing him again in December, discover a comedian who's found his groove, a transformed artist, a death-defier.

Russell Kane, a relatively new British comic, is a death-defier, the sort of comedian who won't let a moment pass without filling it with laughter. I went to see him on the last night of his Edinburgh run. His show was called "Gaping Flaws," a phrase lifted from a negative online review of his 2007 Edinburgh show, which, in turn, was called "Easy Cliché and Tired Stereotype," a phrase lifted from a negative review of his début 2006 show, "Russell Kane's Theory of Pretension." All these reviews came from the same man, Steve Bennett, a prominent British comedy critic who writes for the Web site Chortle. The problem with Kane was class—the British problem. A self-defined working-class "Essex boy" (though, physically, his look is more indie Americana than English suburbia; he's a dead ringer for the singer Anthony Kiedis), he centers his act on the tricky business of being the alien in the family, the wannabe intellectual son of a working-class, bigoted father. To his father, Kane's passion for reading is deeply suspicious, his interest in the arts tantamount to an admission of sexual deviancy. Kane's dilemma has a natural flip side, a typically British ressentiment for those very people his sensibilities have moved him toward. The middle classes, the Guardianistas (readers of the left-leaning liberal newspaper the *Guardian*), the smug élites who have made him feel his class in the first place. *Can't go home, can't leave home:* a subject close to my heart.

In 2006, Kane played this material too broadly, overexploiting a natural gift for grotesque physical comedy: his father was a hulking deformed monster, the Guardianistas fey fools, skipping across the stage. In 2007, the chip on his shoulder was still there, but the ideas

were better, the portraits more detailed, more refined; he began to find his balance, which is a rare mixture of inspired verbal sparring and effective physical comedy. Third time's the charm: "Gaping Flaws" had almost none. It was still all about class, but some magical integration had occurred. I couldn't help being struck by the sense that what it might take a novelist a lifetime to achieve, a bright comedian can resolve in three seasons. (How to present a working-class experience to the middle classes without diluting it. How to stay angry without letting anger distort your work. How to be funny about the most serious things.)

Audiences love death-defiers like Kane. It's what they pay their money for, after all: laughs per minute. They tend to be less fond of those comedians who have themselves tired of the non-stop laughter and pine for a little silence. I want to call it "comedy nausea." Comedy nausea is the extreme incarnation of what my father felt: not only is joke-telling a cheap art; *the whole business of standup* is, in some sense, a shameful cheat. For a comedian of this kind, I imagine it feels like a love affair gone wrong. You start out wanting people to laugh in exactly the places you mean them to laugh, then they *always* laugh where you want them to laugh—then you start to hate them for it. Sometimes the feeling is temporary. The comedian returns to standup and finds new joy in, and respect for, the art of death-defying. Sometimes, as with Peter Cook (voted, by his fellow-comedians, in a British poll, the greatest comedian of all time), comedy nausea turns terminal, and only the most difficult laugh in the world will satisfy. Toward the end of his life, when his professional comedy output was practically nil, Cook made a series of phone calls to a radio call-in show, using the pseudonym Sven from Swiss Cottage (an area of northwest London), during which he discussed melancholy Norwegian matters in a thick Norwegian accent, arguably the funniest and bleakest "work" he ever did.

At the extreme end of this sensibility lies the anti-comedian. An anti-comedian not only allows death onstage; he invites death up.

Andy Kaufman was an anti-comedian. So was Lenny Bruce. Tommy Cooper is the great British example. His comedy persona was “inept magician.” He did intentionally bad magic tricks and told surreal jokes that played like Zen koans. He *actually* died onstage, collapsing from a heart attack during a 1984 live TV broadcast. I was nine, watching it on telly with Harvey. When Cooper fell over, we laughed and laughed, along with the rest of Britain, realizing only when the show cut to the commercial break that he wasn’t kidding.

There was an anti-comedian at Edinburgh this year. His name was Edward Aczel. You will not have heard of him—neither had I, neither has practically anyone. This was only his second Edinburgh appearance. Maybe it was the fortuitous meeting of my mournful mood and his morbid material, but I thought his show, “Do I Really Have to Communicate with You?,” was one of the strangest, and finest, hours of live comedy I’d ever seen. It started with neither a bang nor a whimper. It didn’t really start. We, the audience, sat in nervous silence in a tiny dark room, and waited. Some fumbling with a cassette recorder was heard, faint music, someone mumbling backstage: “Welcome to the stage . . . Edward Aczel.” Said without enthusiasm. A man wandered out. Going bald, early forties, schlubby, entirely nondescript. He said, “All right?” in a hopeless sort of way, and then decided that he wanted to do the introduction again. He went offstage and came on again. He did this several times. Despair settled over the room. Finally, he fixed himself in front of the microphone. “I think you’ll all recall,” he muttered, barely audible, “the words of Wittgenstein, the great twentieth-century philosopher, who said, ‘If indeed mankind came to earth for a specific reason, it certainly wasn’t to enjoy ourselves.’ ” A long, almost unbearable pause. “If you could bear that in mind while I’m on, I’d certainly appreciate it.” Then, on a large flip chart, the kind of thing an account manager in an Aylesbury marketing agency might swipe from his office (Aczel is, in real life, an account manager for an Aylesbury marketing agency), he

began to write with a Magic Marker. It was a list of what not to expect from his show. He went through it with us. There was to be:

No nudity.

No juggling.

No impressions of any well-known people.

No reference to crop circles during the show.

No one will be conceived during the show.

No tackling head-on of any controversial issues. . . .

And finally, and I think most importantly—

No refunds.

I recognized my father's spirit in this list: *No good can come of this*. He then told us that he had a box of jigsaw puzzles backstage, for anyone who became dangerously bored. Later, he drew a graph made up of an x-axis, which stood for "TIME," and a y-axis, for "GOODWILL," on which he tracked the show's progress. Point one, low down: "*Let's all go and get a drink—this is pointless.*" Point two, slightly higher up: "*O.K., carry on, whatever.*" Point three, still only halfway up: "*We could all be here forever. We think this is great.*" He looked at his shoes, then, with mild aggression, at the audience. "We'll never get to that point," he said. "It's just . . . it'll never happen." By this time, everyone was laughing, but the laughter was a little crazy, disjointed. It's a reckless thing, for a comedian, to be this honest with an audience. To say, in effect, "Whatever I do, whatever you do, we're *all* going to die." When it finally came to jokes ("Now we go into the section of the show routinely called 'material,' for obvious reasons"), Aczel had a dozen written on his hand, and they were very funny, but by now he had already convinced us that jokes were the least of what could

be done here. It was an easy and wonderful thing to believe this show a genuine shambles, saved only by our attention and by chance. (We were mistaken, of course. Every stumble, every murmur, is identical, every night.) In the lobby afterward, calendars were on sale, each month illustrated by impossibly banal photographs of Aczel in bed, washing his face, walking into work, standing in the road. Mine sits on my desk, next to my father in his Tupperware sandwich box. On the cover, Aczel is pictured in a supermarket aisle. The subtitle reads, “Life is endless, until you die”—Edith Piaf. Each month has a message for me. November: “Winter is coming—Yes!” April: “Who cares.” June: “This is not the life I was promised.” *There is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us!*

On the last night of the Edinburgh festival, in another small, dark, drunken venue, I waited for my brother to go on. It was about two in the morning. Only comedians were left at the festival; the audiences had all gone home. I feared for him, again—but he did his set, and he killed. He was relaxed. There was nothing riding on his performance; the pause had been fixed. Then a young Australian dude came on and spoke a lot about bottle openers, and he killed, too. Maybe everybody kills at two in the morning. Then the end of the end: one last comedian took the bar stage. This was Andy Zaltzman, a great, tall man with an electrified Einstein hairdo and a cutting, political-satirical act that got its laughs per minute. He set to work, confident, funny, and instantly got heckled, a heckle that was followed by a collective audience intake of breath, for the heckler was Daniel Kitson, a rather shy, whimsical young comedian from Yorkshire who looks like a beardy cross between a fisherman and a geography teacher. Kitson won the Perrier Comedy Award in 2002, at the age of twenty-five, and his gift is for the crafting of exquisite narratives, shows shaped like Alice Munro stories, bathetic and beautiful. A comedy-snob thrill passed through the room. It was a bit like Nick Drake turning up at a James Taylor gig. Kitson good-humoredly heckled Zaltzman, and Zaltzman

heckled back. Their ideas went spiralling down nonsensical paths, collided, did battle, and separated. Kitson busied himself handing out flyers for “Our joint show, tomorrow!,” a show that couldn’t exist, because the festival was over. We all took one. Zaltzman and Kitson got loose; the jokes were everywhere, with everyone, the whole room becoming comedy. There was a kind of hysteria abroad. I looked over at my brother and could see that he’d got this abdominal pain, too, and we were both doubled over, crying, and I wished Harvey were there, and at the same moment I felt something come free in me.

I have to confess to an earlier comic embellishment: my father is no longer in a Tupperware sandwich box. He was, for a year, but then I bought a pretty Italian Art Deco vase for him, completely see-through, so I can see through to him. The vase is posh, and not funny like the sandwich box, but I decided that what Harvey didn’t have much of in life he would get in death. In life, he found Britain hard. It was a nation divided by postcodes and accents, schools and last names. The humor of its people helped make it bearable. *You don’t have to be funny to live here, but it helps.* Hancock, Fawlty, Partridge, Brent: in my mind, they’re all clinging to the middle rungs of England’s class ladder. That, in large part, is the comedy of their situations.

For eighty-one years, my father was up to the same game, though his situation wasn’t so comical; at least, the living of it wasn’t. *Listen, I’ll tell you a joke:* his mother had been in service, his father worked on the buses; he passed the grammar-school exam, but the cost of the uniform for the secondary school was outside the family’s budget. *No, wait, it gets better:* At thirteen, he left school to fill the inkwells in a lawyer’s office, to set the fire in the grate. At seventeen, he went to fight in the Second World War. In the fifties, he got married, started a family, and, finding that he had a good eye, tried commercial photography. His pictures were good, he set up a little studio, but then his business partner stiffed him in

some dark plot of which he would never speak. His marriage ended. *And here's the kicker*: in the sixties, he had to start all over again, as a salesman. In the seventies, he married for the second time. A new lot of children arrived. The high point was the late eighties, a senior salesman now at a direct-mail company—selling paper, just like David Brent. Finally, the (lower) middle rung! A maisonette, half a garden, a sweet deal with a local piano teacher who taught Ben and me together, two bums squeezed onto the piano stool. But it didn't last, and the second marriage didn't last, and he ended up with little more than he had started with. Listening to my first novel, "White Teeth," on tape, and hearing the rough arc of his life in the character Archie Jones, he took it well, seeing the parallels but also the difference: "He had better luck than me!" The novel was billed as comic fiction. To Harvey, it sat firmly in the laugh-or-you'll-cry genre. And when that "Fawlty Towers" boxed set came back to me as my only inheritance (along with a cardigan, several atlases, and a photograph of Venice), I did a little of both. ♦

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[Profiles](#)

How Richard Pryor Became America's Comic Prophet of Race

Instead of adapting to the white perspective, he forced white audiences to follow him into his own, Black experience.

By [Hilton Als](#)

September 13, 1999



Pryor enlightened his audience on race and interracial relationships using a flamboyant vocabulary that he'd learned growing up in his grandmother's whorehouse.

Illustration by Al Hirschfeld; © The Al Hirschfeld Foundation. www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org

SKIN FLICK

Winter, 1973. Late afternoon: the entr'acte between dusk and darkness, when the people who conduct their business in the street —numbers runners in gray chesterfields, out-of-work barmaids playing the dozens, adolescents cultivating their cigarette jones and lust, small-time hustlers selling “authentic” gold wristwatches that are platinum bright—look for a place to roost and to drink in the day's sin. Young black guy, looks like the comedian Richard Pryor, walks into one of his hangouts, Opal's Silver Spoon Café. A greasy dive with an R. & B. jukebox, it could be in Detroit or in New York, could be anywhere. Opal's has a proprietor—Opal, a young and wise black woman, who looks like the comedian Lily Tomlin —and a little bell over the door that goes *tink-a-link*, announcing all the handouts and gimmes who come to sit at Opal's counter and talk about how needy their respective asses are.

Black guy sits at the counter, and Opal offers him some potato soup —“something nourishing,” she says. Black guy has moist, on-the-verge-of-lying-or-crying eyes and a raggedy Afro. He wears a green fatigue jacket, the kind of jacket brothers brought home from ’Nam, which guys like this guy continue to wear long after they've returned home, too shell-shocked or stoned to care much about their haberdashery. Juke—that's the black guy's name—is Opal's baby, flopping about in all them narcotics he's trying to get off of by taking that methadone, which Juke and Opal pronounce “methadon”—the way two old-timey Southerners would, the way Juke and Opal's elders might have, if they knew what that shit was, or was for.

Juke and Opal express their feelings for each other, their shared view of the world, in a lyrical language, a colored people's language, which tries to atomize their anger and their depression. Sometimes their anger is wry: Opal is tired of hearing about Juke's efforts to get a job, and tells him so. “Hand me that jive about job

training,” she says. “You trained, all right. You highly skilled at not working.” But that’s not entirely true. Juke has submitted himself to the rigors of “rehabilitation.” “I was down there for about three weeks, at that place, working,” Juke says. “Had on a suit, tie. Shaving. Acting crazy. Looked just like a fool in the circus.” Pause. “And I’m fed up with it.” Pause. “Now I know how to do a job that don’t know how to be done no more.” Opal’s face fills with sadness. Looking at her face can fill your mind with sadness. She says, “For real?” It’s a rhetorical question that black people have always asked each other or themselves when they’re handed more hopelessness: Is this for real?

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Night is beginning to spread all over Juke and Opal’s street; it is the color of a thousand secrets combined. The bell rings, and a delivery man comes in, carting pies. Juke decides that everyone should chill out—he’ll play the jukebox, they’ll all get down. Al Green singing “Let’s Stay Together” makes the pie man and Juke do a little finger-snapping, a little jive. Opal hesitates, says, “Naw,” but then dances anyway, and her shyness is just part of the fabric of the day, as uneventful as the delivery man leaving to finish up his rounds, or Opal and Juke standing alone in this little restaurant, a society unto themselves.

The doorbell’s tiny peal. Two white people—a man and a woman, social workers—enter Opal’s. Youngish, trenchcoated. And the minute the white people enter, something terrible happens, from an aesthetic point of view. They alienate everything. They fracture our suspended disbelief. They interrupt our identification with the protagonists of the TV show we’ve been watching, which becomes TV only when those social workers start hassling our Juke, our Opal, equal halves of the same resilient black body. When we see

those white people, we start thinking about things like credits, and remember that this is a television play, after all, written by the brilliant Jane Wagner, and played with astonishing alacrity and compassion by Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin on “Lily,” Tomlin’s second variety special, which aired on CBS in 1973, and which remains, a little over a quarter of a century later, the most profound meditation on race and class that I have ever seen on a major network.

“We’re doing some community research and we’d like to ask you a few questions,” the white woman social worker declares as soon as she enters Opal’s. Juke and Opal are more than familiar with this line of inquiry, which presumes that people like them are always available for questioning—servants of the liberal cause. “I wonder if you can tell me, have you ever been addicted to drugs?” the woman asks Juke.

Pryor-as-Juke responds instantly. “Yeah, I been addicted,” he says. “I’m addicted right now—don’t write it down, man, be cool, it’s not for the public. I mean, what I go through is private.” He is incapable of making “Fuck you” his first response—or even his first thought. Being black has taught him how to allow white people their innocence. For black people, being around white people is sometimes like taking care of babies you don’t like, babies who throw up on you again and again, but whom you cannot punish, because they’re babies. Eventually, you direct that anger at yourself—it has nowhere else to go.

Juke tries to turn the questioning around a little, through humor, which is part of his pathos. “I have some questions,” he tells the community researchers, then tries to approximate their straight, white tone: “Who’s Pigmeat Markham’s Mama?” he asks. “Wilt Chamberlain the tallest colored chap you ever saw?”

When the white people have left and Juke is about to leave, wrapped in his thin jacket, he turns to Opal and says, “You sweet.

You a sweet woman. . . . I'll think aboutcha." His eyes are wide with love and need, and maybe fear or madness. "Be glad when it's spring," he says to Opal. Pause. "Flower!"

"Lily" was never shown again on network television, which is not surprising, given that part of its radicalism is based on the fact that it features a white female star who tries to embody a black woman while communicating with a black man about substantive emotional matters, and who never wears anything as theatrically simple as blackface to do it; Tomlin plays Opal in whiteface, as it were. Nevertheless, "Juke and Opal," which lasts all of nine minutes and twenty-five seconds, and which aired in the same season in which "Hawaii Five-O," "The Waltons," and "Ironside" were among television's top-rated shows, remains historically significant for reasons other than the skin game.

As Juke, Richard Pryor gave one of his relatively few great performances in a project that he had not written or directed. He made use of the poignancy that marks all of his great comedic and dramatic performances, and of the vulnerability—the pathos cradling his sharp wit—that had seduced people into loving him in the first place. Tomlin kept Pryor on the show over objections from certain of the network's executives, and it may have been her belief in him as a performer, combined with the high standards she set for herself and others, that spurred on the competitive-minded Pryor. His language in this scene feels improvised, confessional, and so internalized that it's practically nonverbal: not unlike the best of Pryor's own writing—the stories he tells when he talks shit into a microphone, doing standup. And as he sits at Opal's counter we can see him falling in love with Tomlin's passion for her work, recognizing it as the passion he feels when he peoples the stage with characters who might love him as much as Tomlin-as-Opal seems to now.

Although Richard Pryor was more or less forced to retire in 1994, eight years after he discovered that he had multiple sclerosis ("It's

the stuff God hits your ass with when he doesn't want to kill ya—just slow ya down,” he told *Entertainment Weekly* in 1993), his work as a comedian, a writer, an actor, and a director amounts to a significant chapter not only in late-twentieth-century American comedy but in American entertainment in general. Pryor is best known now for his work in the lackadaisical Gene Wilder buddy movies or for abominations like “The Toy.” But far more important was the prescient commentary on the issues of race and sex in America that he presented through standup and sketches like “Juke and Opal”—the heartfelt and acute social observation, the comedy that littered the stage with the trash of the quotidian as it was sifted through his harsh and poetic imagination, and that changed the very definition of the word “entertainment,” particularly for a black entertainer.

The subject of blackness has taken a strange and unsatisfying journey through American thought: first, because blackness has almost always had to explain itself to a largely white audience in order to be heard, and, second, because it has generally been assumed to have only one story to tell—a story of oppression that plays on liberal guilt. The writers behind the collective modern ur-text of blackness—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison—all performed some variation on the theme. Angry but distanced, their rage blanketed by charm, they lived and wrote to be liked. Ultimately, whether they wanted to or not, they in some way embodied the readers who appreciated them most—white liberals.

Richard Pryor was the first black American spoken-word artist to avoid this. Although he reprised the history of black American comedy—picking what he wanted from the work of great storytellers like Bert Williams, Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, Nipsey Russell, LaWanda Page, and Flip Wilson—he also pushed everything one step further. Instead of adapting to the white perspective, he forced white audiences to follow him into his own experience. Pryor didn’t manipulate his audiences’ white guilt or

their black moral outrage. If he played the race card, it was only to show how funny he looked when he tried to shuffle the deck. And as he made blackness an acknowledged part of the American atmosphere he also brought the issue of interracial love into the country's discourse. In a culture whose successful male Negro authors wrote about interracial sex with a combination of reverence and disgust, Pryor's gleeful, "fuck it" attitude had an effect on the general population which Wright's "Native Son" or Baldwin's "Another Country" had not had. His best work showed us that black men like him and the white women they loved were united in their disenfranchisement; in his life and onstage, he performed the great, largely unspoken story of America.

"I love Lily," Pryor said in a *Rolling Stone* interview with David Felton, in 1974, after "Juke and Opal" had aired and he and Tomlin had moved on to other things. "I have a thing about her, a little crush. . . . I get in awe of her. I'd seen her on 'Laugh-In' and shit, and something about her is very sensual, isn't it?"

Sensuality implies a certain physical abandonment, an acknowledgment of the emotional mess that oozes out between the seams that hold our public selves together—and an understanding of the metaphors that illustrate that disjunction. (One of Tomlin's early audition techniques was to tap-dance with taps taped to the soles of her bare feet.) It is difficult to find that human untidiness—what Pryor called "the madness" of everyday life—in the formulaic work now being done by the performers who ostensibly work in the same vein as Pryor and Tomlin. Compare the rawness of the four episodes of a television show that Pryor co-wrote and starred in for NBC in 1977 with any contemporary HBO show by Tracey Ullman (who needs blackface to play a black woman): the first Pryor special opens with a closeup of his face as he announces that he has not had to compromise himself to appear on a network-sponsored show. The camera then pulls back to reveal Pryor seemingly nude but with his genitalia missing.

Pryor's art defies the very definition of the word "order." He based his style on digressions and riffs—the monologue as jam session. He reinvented standup, which until he developed his signature style, in 1971, had consisted largely of borscht-belt-style male comedians telling tales in the Jewish vernacular, regardless of their own religion or background. Pryor managed to make blacks interesting to audiences that were used to responding to a liberal Jewish sensibility—and, unlike some of his colored colleagues, he did so without "becoming" Jewish himself. (Dick Gregory, for example, was a political comedian in the tradition of Mort Sahl; Bill Cosby was a droll Jack Benny.) At the height of his career, Pryor never spoke purely in the complaint mode. He was often baffled by life's complexities, but he rarely told my-wife-made-me-sleep-on-the-sofa jokes or did "bits" whose sole purpose was to "kill" an audience with a boffo punch line. Instead, he talked about characters—black street people, mostly. Because the life rhythm of a black junkie, say, implies a certain drift, Pryor's stories did not have badda-bing conclusions. Instead, they were encapsulated in a physical attitude: each character was represented in Pryor's walk, in his gestures—which always contained a kind of vicarious wonder at the lives he was enacting. Take, for instance, his sketch of a wino in Peoria, Illinois—Pryor's home town and the land of his imagination—as he encounters Dracula. In the voice of a Southern black man, down on his luck:

Hey man, say, nigger—you with the cape. . . . What's your name, boy? Dracula? What kind of name is that for a nigger? Where you from, fool? Transylvania? I know where it is, nigger! You ain't the smartest motherfucker in the world, even though you is the ugliest. Oh yeah, you a ugly motherfucker. Why you don't get your teeth fixed, nigger? That shit hanging all out your mouth. Why you don't get you an orthodontist? . . . This is 1975, boy. Get your shit together. What's wrong with your natural? Got that dirt all in the back of your neck. You's a filthy little motherfucker, too. You got to

be home 'fore the sun come up? You ain't lyin', motherfucker.
See your ass during the day, you liable to get arrested. You
want to suck what? You some kind of freak, boy? . . . You
ain't suckin' nothing here, junior.

Pryor's two best comedy albums, both of which were recorded during the mid to late seventies—"Bicentennial Nigger" and "That Nigger's Crazy"—are not available on CD, but his two concert films, "Richard Pryor Live in Concert" and "Richard Pryor—Live on the Sunset Strip," which were released in 1979 and 1982, respectively, are out on video. The concert films are excellent examples of what the *Village Voice* critic Carrie Rickey once described as Pryor's ability to "scare us into laughing at his demons—our demons—exorcising them through mass hyperventilation." "Pryor doesn't tell jokes," she wrote, "he tells all, in the correct belief that without punch lines, humor has *more* punch. And pungency." Taken together, the concert films show the full panorama of Pryor's moods: brilliant, boring, insecure, demanding, misogynist, racist, playful, and utterly empathetic.

Before Richard Pryor, there were only three aspects of black maleness to be found on TV or in the movies: the suave, pimp-style blandness of Billy Dee Williams; the big-dicked, quiet machismo of the football hero Jim Brown; and the cable-knit homilies of Bill Cosby. Pryor was the first image we'd ever had of black male fear. Not the kind of Stepin Fetchit noggin-bumpin'-into-walls fear that turned Buckwheat white when he saw a ghost in the "Our Gang" comedies popular in the twenties, thirties, and forties—a character that Eddie Murphy resuscitated in a presumably ironic way in the eighties on "Saturday Night Live." Pryor was filled with dread and panic—an existential fear, based on real things, like racism and lost love. (In a skit on "In Living Color," the actor Damon Wayans played Pryor sitting in his kitchen and looking terrified, while a voiceover said, "Richard Pryor—afraid of absolutely everything.")

“Hi. I’m Richard Pryor.” Pause. “Hope I’m funny.” That was how he introduced himself to audiences for years, but he never sounded entirely convinced that he cared about being funny. Instead, Pryor embodied the voice of injured humanity. A satirist of his own experience, he revealed what could be considered family secrets—secrets about his past, and about blacks in general, and about his relationship to the black and white worlds he did and did not belong to. In the black community, correctness, political or otherwise, remains part of the mortar that holds lives together. Pryor’s comedy was a high-wire act: how to stay funny to a black audience while satirizing the moral strictures that make black American life like no other.

The standard approach, in magazine articles about Pryor, has been to comment on his anger—in an imitation-colloquial language meant to approximate Pryor’s voice. “Richard Pryor said it first: *That nigger’s crazy*,” begins a 1978 article in *People* magazine. And Pryor had fun with the uneasiness that the word “nigger” provoked in others. (Unlike Lenny Bruce, he didn’t believe that if you said a word over and over again it would lose its meaning.) Take his great “Supernigger” routine: “Look up in the sky, it’s a crow, it’s a bat. No, it’s Supernigger! Yes, friends, Supernigger, with X-ray vision that enables him to see through everything except Whitey.”

In 1980, in the second of three interviews that Barbara Walters conducted with Richard Pryor, this exchange took place:

WALTERS: When you’re onstage . . . see, it’s hard for me to say. I was going to say, you talk about niggers. I can’t . . . you can say it. I can’t say it.

PRYOR: You just said it.

WALTERS: Yeah, but I feel so . . .

PRYOR: You said it very good.

WALTERS: . . . uncomfortable.

PRYOR: Well, good. You said it pretty good.

WALTERS: O.K.

PRYOR: That's not the first time you said it. (*Laughter.*)

Pryor's anger, though, is actually not as interesting as his self-loathing. Given how much he did to make black pride part of American popular culture, it is arresting to see how at times his blackness seemed to feel like an ill-fitting suit. One gets the sense that he called himself a "nigger" as a kind of preëmptive strike, because he never knew when the term would be thrown at him by whites, by other blacks, or by the women he loved. Because he didn't match any of the prevailing stereotypes of "cool" black maleness, he carved out an identity for himself that was not only "nigger" but "sub-nigger." In "Live on the Sunset Strip" he wears a maraschino-red suit with silk lapels, a black shirt, and a bow tie. He says, "Billy Dee Williams could hang out in this suit and look cool." He struts. "And me?" His posture changes from cocky to pitiful.

Pryor believed that there was something called unconditional love, which he alone had not experienced. But to whom could he, a "sub-nigger," turn for that kind of love? The working-class blacks who made him feel guilty for leaving them behind? His relatives, who acted as if it were their right to hit him up for cash because he'd used their stories to make it? The white people who felt safe with him because he was neurotic—a quality they equated with intelligence? The women who married him for money or status? The children he rarely saw? He was alienated from nearly everyone and everything except his need. This drama was what made Pryor's edge so sharp. He acted out against his fantasy by testing it with

rude, brilliant commentary. A perfect role for Pryor might have been Dostoyevsky's antihero, Alexei, in "The Gambler," whose bemused nihilism affects every relationship he attempts. (Pryor once told Walters that he saw people "as the nucleus of a great idea that hasn't come to be yet.") That antiheroic anger prevents him from just telling a joke. He tells it through clenched teeth. He tells it to stave off bad times. He tells it to look for love.

HIS LIFE, AS A BIT

Black guy named Richard Pryor, famous, maybe a little high, appears on the eleventh Barbara Walters special, broadcast on May 29, 1979, and says this about his childhood, a sad house of cards he has glued together with wit:

PRYOR: It was hell, because I had nobody to talk to. I was a child, right, and I grew up seeing my mother . . . and my aunties going to rooms with men, you understand. . . .

WALTERS: Your grandmother ran a house of prostitution or a whorehouse.

PRYOR: Three houses. Three.

WALTERS: Three houses of prostitution. She was the chief madam.

PRYOR: . . . There were no others.

WALTERS: O.K. . . . Who believed in you? Who cared about you?

PRYOR: Richard Franklin Lennox Thomas Pryor the Third.

The isolation that Richard Pryor feels is elaborated on from time to time, like a bit he can't stop reworking. The sad bit, he could call it,

if he did bits anymore, his skinny frame twisting around the words to a story that goes something like this: Born in Peoria, on December 1, 1940. “They called Peoria the model city. That meant it had the niggers under control.” Grew up in one of the whorehouses on North Washington Street, which was the house of his paternal grandmother, Marie Carter Pryor Bryant. “She reminded me of a large sunflower—big, strong, bright, appealing,” Pryor wrote in his 1995 memoir, “Pryor Convictions.” But “she was also a mean, tough, controlling bitch.”

Pryor called his father’s mother “Mama,” despite the fact that he had a mother, Gertrude. When Richard’s father, Buck Carter, met Gertrude, she was already involved in Peoria’s nefarious underworld, and she soon began working in Marie’s whorehouse. Everything in Richard Pryor’s world, as he grew up, centered on Marie, and he never quite recovered from that influence. “I come from criminal people,” he told one radio interviewer. At the age of six, he was sexually abused by a young man in the neighborhood (who, after Richard Pryor became Richard Pryor, came to his trailer on a film set and asked for his autograph). And Pryor never got over the division he saw in his mother: the way she could separate her emotional self from her battered body and yet was emotionally damaged anyway.

“At least, Gertrude didn’t flush me down the toilet, as some did,” Pryor wrote in his memoir. “The only person scarier than God was my mother. . . . One time Buck hit Gertrude, and she turned blue with anger and said ‘Okay, motherfucker, don’t hit me no more. . . . Don’t stand in front of me with fucking undershorts on and hit me, motherfucker.’ Quick as lightning, she reached out with her finger claws and swiped at my father’s dick. Ripped his nutsack off. I was just a kid when I saw this.” Pryor records the drama as a born storyteller would—in the details. And the detail that filters through his memory most clearly is the rhythm of Gertrude’s speech, its

combination of profanity and rhetoric. Not unlike a routine by Richard Pryor.

Pryor soon discovered humor—the only form of manipulation he had in his community of con artists, hookers, and pimps. “I wasn’t much taller than my Daddy’s shin when I found that I could make my family laugh,” Pryor wrote.

I sat on a railing of bricks and found that when I fell off on purpose everyone laughed, including my grandmother, who made it her job to scare the shit out of people. . . . After a few more minutes of falling, a little dog wandered by and pooped in our yard. I got up, ran to my grandmother, and slipped in the dog poop. It made Mama and the rest laugh again. Shit, I was really onto something then. So I did it a second time. “Look at that boy! He’s crazy!” That was my first joke. All in shit.

When Pryor was ten years old, his mother left his father and went to stay with relatives in Springfield, Illinois, but Pryor stayed with his grandmother. In a biography by John and Dennis Williams, Pryor’s teacher Marguerite Yingst Parker remembered him as “perpetually exhausted, sometimes lonely, always likable. . . . He was a poor black kid in what was then a predominantly white school, who didn’t mingle with his classmates on the playground.” Pryor often got through the tedium of school by entertaining his classmates. Eventually, Parker struck a deal with him: if he got to school on time, she would give him a few minutes each week to do a routine in front of the class. Not long afterward, Pryor met Juliette Whittaker, an instructor at the Carver Community Center. “He was about eleven, but looked younger because he was such a skinny little boy. And very bright,” she recalled in the Williams book. “We were rehearsing ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ and he was watching. He asked if he could be in the play. I told him we only had one part left, and he said, ‘I don’t care. I’ll take anything. I just want to be in

the play.’ . . . He took the script home and, unbeknownst to anybody, he memorized the entire thing.”

When Pryor was in the eighth grade, a teacher who was fed up with his classroom routines asked him to leave school. He slowly became absorbed into the mundane working-class life that Peoria had to offer, taking a job at a packing plant, running errands. When he was seventeen, he discovered that the black woman he was seeing had also been sleeping with his father. Then, in an attempt to escape, Pryor enlisted in the Army, in 1958. He was stationed in Germany, where he was involved in a racial incident: a young white soldier laughed too hard about the painful black parts in the Douglas Sirk film “Imitation of Life,” and Pryor and a number of other black inductees beat and stabbed him. Pryor went to jail, and when he was discharged, in 1960, he returned to his grandmother’s twilight world of street life and women for hire.

Pryor had some idea of what he wanted to be: a comedian like the ones he had seen on TV, particularly the black comedians Dick Gregory and Redd Foxx. He began performing at small venues in Peoria, telling topical jokes in the cadence of the time: “You know how to give Mao Tse-tung artificial respiration? No. Good!” The humor then “was kind of rooted in the fifties,” the comedian and actor Steve Martin told me. “Very straight jokes, you know. The dominant theme on television and in the public’s eye was something Catskills. Jokes. Punch lines.” And it was within that form that Pryor began to make a name for himself in the local clubs.

But Pryor was ambitious, and his ambition carried him away from Peoria. In 1961, he left behind his first wife and their child, “because I could,” and began working the night-club circuit in places like East St. Louis, Buffalo, and Youngstown, Ohio. In 1963, he made his way to New York. “I opened *Newsweek* and read about Bill Cosby,” Pryor told David Felton. “That fucked me up. I said, ‘God damn it, this nigger’s doin’ what *I’m* fixin’ to do. I want to be

the only nigger, ain't no room for two niggers.' " In New York, Pryor began appearing regularly at Café Wha?. By 1966, he had begun to make it nationally. He appeared on a show hosted by Rudy Vallee called "On Broadway Tonight." Then on Ed Sullivan, Merv Griffin, and Johnny Carson—appearing each time with marcelled hair and wearing a black suit and tie that made him look like an undertaker. But his jokes were like placards that read "Joke": "When I was young I used to think my people didn't like me. Because they used to send me to the store for bread and then they'd move." Or "I heard a knock on the door. I said to my wife, 'There's a knock on the door.' My wife said, 'That's pecul-yar, we ain't got no door.' "

He was fêted as the new Bill Cosby by such show-business luminaries as Bobby Darin and Sid Caesar, and other comedians and writers counselled him to keep it that way: "Don't mention the fact that you're a nigger. Don't go into such bad taste," Pryor remembers being told by a white writer called Murray Roman. "They were gonna try to help me be nothin' as best they could," he said in the *Rolling Stone* interview. "The life I was leading, it wasn't me. I was a robot. Beep. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Sands Hotel. Maids are funny. Beep. . . . I didn't feel good. I didn't feel I could tell anybody to kiss my ass, 'cause I didn't have no ass, you dig?"

A drug habit kicked in. Then, in 1967, while Pryor was doing a show in Las Vegas, he broke down. "I looked out at the audience," Pryor wrote. "The first person I saw was Dean Martin, seated at one of the front tables. He was staring right back at me. . . . I checked out the rest of the audience. They were staring at me as intently as Dean, waiting for that first laugh. . . . I asked myself, Who're they looking at, Rich? . . . And in that flash of introspection when I was unable to find an answer, I crashed. . . . I finally spoke to the sold-out crowd: 'What the fuck am I doing here?' Then I turned and walked off the stage."

He was through with what he'd been doing: "I was a Negro for twenty-three years. I gave that shit up. No room for advancement."

In the following years—1968 through 1971—Pryor worked on material that became more or less what we know today as the Richard Pryor experience. A close friend, the comedian and writer Paul Mooney, took him to the looser, more politicized environs of Berkeley, and Pryor holed up there and wrote.

The black folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston once wrote that, although she had “landed in the crib of negroism” at birth, it hadn’t occurred to her until she left her home town that her identity merited a legitimate form of intellectual inquiry. It was only after Pryor had left Peoria and wrested a certain level of success from the world that he was able to see his own negroism, and what made it unique. As Mel Watkins writes, in his book “On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying,” after Pryor moved to Berkeley and met the writers Cecil Brown and Ishmael Reed he discovered that “accredited intellectuals” could share “his affection and enthusiasm for the humor and lifestyles of common black folks.” Pryor also discovered Malcolm X’s speeches and Marvin Gaye’s album “What’s Going On.” Both taught him how to treat himself as just another character in a story being told. He distanced himself from the more confessional Lenny Bruce—whose work had already influenced him to adopt a hipper approach to language—and “Richard Pryor” became no more important than the winos or junkies he talked about.

Pryor began to reconstruct himself first through the use of sound—imagining the sound of Frankenstein taking LSD, for example, or a baby “being birthed.” His routines from this time regularly involved gurgles, air blown through pursed lips, beeps. He also began playing with individual words. He would stand in front of an audience and say “God damn” in every way he could think to say it. Or he’d say, “I feel,” in a variety of ways that indicated the many different ways he could feel. And as he began to understand how he

felt he began to see himself, to create his body before his audience. He talked about the way his breath and his farts smelled, what he wanted from love, where he had been, and what America thought he was.

In those years, Pryor began to create characters that were based on his own experience; he explored the territory and language of his family and his childhood—that fertile and unyielding ground that most artists visit again and again. The producer George Schlatter, who watched Pryor’s transformation at a number of clubs in the late sixties and the early seventies, told me, “Richard grew up in a whorehouse. The language he used, he was entitled to it. Now the kids coming up, they use the word ‘fuck’ and that becomes the joke. Richard used the word ‘fuck’ on the way to the joke. It was part of his vocabulary. It was part of his life experience.” As Pryor began to recall his relatives’ voices, he became able to see them from the outside, not without a certain degree of fondness. “My aunt Maxine could suck a neckbone, it was a work of art,” he’d say. Or:

My father was one of them eleven o’clock niggers. [Voice becoming more high-pitched] “Say, say, where you going, Richard? Say, huh? Well, nigger, you ain’t ask nobody if you could go no place. What the fuck, you a man now, nigger? Get a job. I don’t give a fuck where you go, be home by eleven. You understand eleven, don’t you, nigger? *You can tell time, can’t you?* . . . Eleven o’clock, bring your ass here. I don’t mean down the street singing with them niggers, either. I ain’t getting you ass out of jail no more, motherfucker. That’s right. [Pause] And bring me back a paper.”

Pryor’s routines became richer in depth, in imagination—rather like the characters Edgar Lee Masters created for his brilliant, problematic “Spoon River Anthology.” But the most popular and best-known of Pryor’s characters—Mudbone, an old black man from Tupelo, Mississippi, whom Pryor created in 1975—also

shows how a Pryor character can be *too* well drawn, too much of a crossover tool. Mudbone spoke with a strong Southern dialect and his tales were directly descended from the slave narratives that told (as the critic Darryl Pinckney described them) “of spirits riding people at night, of elixirs dearly bought from conjure men, chicken bones rubbed on those from whom love was wanted.” From “Mudbone Goes to Hollywood”:

OLD NEGRO MAN’S VOICE: There was an old man name was Mudbone. . . . And he used to sit right here in front of the barbecue shop and he’d dip snuff . . . and he’d spit. . . . He’d been in a great love affair. That right. He had a woman—he loved her very much—he had to hurt her though ’cause she fucked around on him. He said he knew she was fucking around ’cause I’d leave home and go to work and come back home, toilet seat be up. . . . So I set a little old trap for her there. Went to work early, you know, always did get up early, ’cause I like to hear the birds and shit. . . . So this particular morning, went on to work. Set my trap for this girl. She was pretty, too. Loved her. Sweet as she could be. Breast milk like Carnation milk. So I nailed the toilet seat down and doubled back and I caught that nigger trying to lift it up. So, say, Well, nigger, send your soul to heaven, ’cause your ass is mine up in here.

Mudbone was the character that Pryor’s audiences requested again and again. But, as Pauline Kael noted in her review of “Live on the Sunset Strip,” Pryor became tired of him: “Voices, ostensibly from the audience, can be heard. One of them calls, ‘Do the Mudbone routine,’ and, rather wearily, saying that it will be for the last time, Pryor sits on a stool and does the ancient storyteller [who] was considered one of his great creations. And the movie goes thud. . . . Pryor looks defeated.”

And he should: Mudbone was the trick he turned and got tired of turning—a safe woolly-headed Negro, a comic version of

Katherine Anne Porter's old Uncle Jimbilly. Compare Mudbone, for example, to the innovative and threatening "Bicentennial Nigger" character: "Some nigger two hundred years old in blackface. With stars and stripes on his forehead, lips just a-shining." "Battle Hymn" theme music, and Pryor's voice becomes Stepin Fetchit-like. "But he happy. He happy, 'cause he been here two hundred years. . . . Over here in America. 'I'm so glad y'all took me out of Dahomey.'" Shuckin' and jivin' laugh. " 'I used to could live to be a hundred and fifty, now I dies of the high blood pressure by the time I'm fifty-two.' "

By 1973, Richard Pryor had become a force in the entertainment industry. He now appeared regularly in such diverse venues as Redd Foxx's comedy club in Central L.A., where the clientele was mostly black, and the Improv, on Sunset Strip, which was frequented by white show-business hipsters. And he behaved as badly as he wanted to wherever he wanted to—whether with women, with alcohol, or with drugs. "I got plenty of money but I'm still a nigger," he told a radio interviewer. He had become Richard Pryor, the self-described "black greasy motherfucker," whose new style of entertainment was just one of many innovations of the decade—in music (Sly and the Family Stone and the Average White Band), in acting (Lily Tomlin and Ronee Blakley), and in directing (Martin Scorsese and Hal Ashby). Cultural rebellion and political activism defined hip in Hollywood then—an era that is all too difficult to recall now.

"The idea of a black guy going out and saying he fucked a white woman was outrageous . . . but funny," Schlatter told me. "White women dug Richard because he was a naughty little boy, and they wanted some of that. He was talking about real things. Nobody was talking below the waist. Richard went right for the lap, man."

Pryor had directed a film called "Bon Appétit" a few years before —the footage is now lost. "The picture opened with a black maid having her pussy eaten at the breakfast table by the wealthy white

man who owned the house where she worked,” he recalled in “Pryor Convictions.” “Then a gang of Black Panther types burst into the house and took him prisoner. As he was led away, the maid fixed her dress and called, ‘*Bon appétit, baby!*’ ”

Each time someone asked why “that nigger was crazy,” Pryor upped the ante by posing a more profound question. On a trip to a gun shop with David Felton in the early seventies, for example, Pryor asked the salesman, “How come all the targets are black?” The salesman smiled, embarrassed. “Uh, I don’t know, Richard,” he said, shaking his head. “I just—” “No, I mean I always wondered about that, you know?” Pryor said.

Pryor’s edginess caught the attention of Mel Brooks, who was already an established Hollywood figure, and in 1972 Brooks hired him to work on a script called “Black Bart,” the story of a smooth, Gucci-wearing black sheriff in the eighteen-seventies American West. This was to be Pryor’s real crossover gig, not only as a writer but as an actor, but the leading role eventually went to Cleavon Little. Whatever the reason for not casting Pryor (some people who were involved with the movie told me that no one could deal with his drinking and his drug use), there are several scenes in the film (renamed “Blazing Saddles”) that couldn’t have been written by anyone else. One scene didn’t make it in. It shows a German saloon singer, Lili von Dyke, in her darkened dressing room with Bart, whom she is trying to seduce.

LILI: Here, let me sit next to you. Tell me, *schatzi*, is it true vat zey say about the way you people are gifted? . . . Oh, oh, it’s twue, it’s twue, it’s twue, it’s twue.

BART: Excuse me, you’re sucking my arm.

Pryor’s best performances (in films he didn’t write himself) date from these years. There is his poignant and striking Oscar-nominated appearance in Sidney J. Furie’s 1972 film, “Lady Sings

the Blues.” As the Piano Man to Diana Ross’s Billie Holiday, Pryor gives a performance that is as emotional and as surprising as his work in “Juke and Opal.” And then there is his brilliant comic turn as Sharp-Eye Washington, the disreputable private detective in Sidney Poitier’s 1974 film, “Uptown Saturday Night”—a character that makes use of Pryor’s ability to convey paranoia with his body: throughout the movie, he looks like a giant exclamation point. And as Zeke Brown, in “Blue Collar,” Paul Schrader’s 1978 film about an automobile plant in Detroit, Pryor gives his greatest sustained—if fraught—film performance. In an interview with the writer Kevin Jackson, Schrader recalls his directorial *début*:

There were . . . problems. Part of it was to do with Richard’s style of acting. Being primarily versed in stand-up comedy he had a creative life of between three and four takes. The first one would be good, the second would be real good, the third would be terrific, and the fourth would probably start to fall off. . . . The other thing Richard would do when he felt his performance going flat was to improvise and change the dialogue just like he would have done in front of a live audience, and he would never tell me or anyone what he was going to do.

Generally, though, Pryor had a *laissez-faire* attitude toward acting. One always feels, when looking at the work that he did in bad movies ranging from “You’ve Got to Walk It Like You Talk It or You’ll Lose That Beat,” in 1971, to “Superman III,” released twelve years and twenty-seven films later, that Pryor had a kind of contempt for these mediocre projects—and for his part in them. Perhaps no character was as interesting to Richard Pryor as Richard Pryor. He certainly didn’t work hard to make us believe that he was anyone other than himself as he walked through shameful duds like “Adiós Amigo.” On the other hand, his fans paid all the love and all the money in the world to see him be himself: they fed his vanity, and his vanity kept him from being a great actor.

In September, 1977, Lily Tomlin asked Pryor to be part of a benefit at the Hollywood Bowl to oppose Proposition Six, a Californian anti-gay initiative. Onstage, Pryor started doing a routine about the first time he'd sucked dick. The primarily gay members of the audience hooted at first—but they didn't respond well to Pryor's frequent use of the word "faggot." Pryor's rhythm was thrown off. "Shit . . . this is really weird," he exploded. "This is an evening about human rights. And I am a human being. . . . I just wanted to test you to your motherfucking soul. I'm doing this shit for *nuthin'*. . . . When the niggers was burning down Watts, you motherfuckers was doin' what you wanted to do on Hollywood Boulevard . . . didn't give a shit about it." And as he walked offstage: "You Hollywood faggots can kiss my happy, *rich* black ass."

Pryor liked to tell the truth, but he couldn't always face it himself. Although he spent years searching for an idealized form of love, his relationships were explosive and short-lived. From 1969 to 1978, he had three serious relationships or marriages—two with white women, one with a black woman—and two children. There were also affairs with film stars such as Pam Grier and Margot Kidder, and one with a drag queen. He was repeatedly in trouble for beating up women and hotel clerks. His sometimes maudlin self-involvement when a woman left him rarely involved any kind of development or growth. It merely encouraged the self-pity that informed much of his emotional life.

By the late seventies, Pryor was freebasing so heavily that he left his bedroom only to go to work and even then only if he could smoke some more on the set. He was even more paranoid than he'd always been and showed very little interest in the world. The endless cycle of dependence—from the drinking to the coke to the other drugs he needed to come down from the coke—began to destroy his health. Then, in 1980, he tried to break the cycle by

killing himself. He wrote his own account of the episode, in “Pryor Convictions”:

After free-basing without interruption for several days in a row, I wasn’t able to discern one day from the next. . . . “I know what I have to do,” I mumbled. “I’ve brought shame to my family. . . . I’ve destroyed my career. I know what I have to do.” . . . I reached for the cognac bottle on the table in front of me and poured it all over me. Real natural, methodical. As the liquid soiled my body and clothing, I wasn’t scared. . . . I was in a place called There. . . . I picked up my Bic lighter. . . . WHOOSH! I was engulfed in flame. . . . Sprinting down the driveway, I went out the gates and ran down the street. . . . Two cops tried to help me. My hands and face were already swollen. My clothes burnt in tatters. And my smoldering chest smelled like a burned piece of meat. . . . “Is there?” I asked. “Is there what?” someone asked. “Oh Lord, there is no help for a poor widow’s son, is there?”

Pryor was in critical condition at the Sherman Oaks Community Hospital for seven weeks. When Jennifer Lee—a white woman, whom he married a year later—went to visit him, he described himself as a “forty-year-old burned-up nigger.” And, in a sense, Pryor never recovered from his suicide attempt. “Live on the Sunset Strip,” which came out three years later, is less a pulled-together performance than the performance of a man trying to pull himself together. He could no longer tell the truth. He couldn’t even take the truth. And, besides, people didn’t want the truth (a forty-year-old burned-up nigger). They wanted Richard Pryor —“sick,” but not ill.

WHITE HONKY BITCH

Jennifer Lee was born and grew up in Ithaca, New York, one of three daughters of a wealthy lawyer. In her twenties, she moved to

L.A. to become an actress, had affairs with Warren Beatty and Roman Polanski, and appeared in several B movies. She met Pryor in 1977, when she was hired to help redecorate his house. “We sat on an oversized brass bed in Richard’s house,” she wrote in an article for *Spin* magazine. “He was blue—heartsick over a woman who was ‘running game’ on him. He was putting a major dent in a big bottle of vodka. You could feel the tears and smell the gardenias, even with hip, white-walled nasal passages.” Since that day, she told me, laughing, as we sat in the garden at the Château Marmont, in L.A., last winter, she has always been “the head bitch.”

As Jennifer talked with me that afternoon, dressed in black leather pants and a black blazer, her white skin made even whiter by her maroon lipstick, I thought of the photographs I had seen of her with Pryor, some of which were reproduced in her 1991 memoir, “Tarnished Angel.” These images were replaced by others: the white actress Shirley Knight berating Al Freeman, Jr., in the film version of Amiri Baraka’s powerful play, “Dutchman,” and Diane Arbus’s haunting photograph of a pregnant white woman and her black husband sitting on a bench in Washington Square in the sixties. Then I thought of Pryor’s routines on interracial sex. From “Black Man, White Woman”:

Don’t ever marry a white woman in California. A lot of you sisters probably saying “Don’t marry a white woman anyway, nigger.” [Pause] Shit. . . . Sisters look at you like you killed yo’ Mama when you out with a white woman. You can’t laugh that shit off, either. [High-pitched, fake-jovial voice] “Ha ha she’s not with me.”

From a routine entitled “Black & White Women”:

There really is a difference between white women and black women. I’ve dated both. Yes, I have. . . . Black women, you be suckin’ on their pussy and they be like, “Wait, nigger, shit. A

little more to the left, motherfucker. You gonna suck the motherfucker, get down.” You can fuck white women and if they don’t come they say, “It’s all right, I’ll just lay here and use a vibrator.”

Pryor was not only an integrationist but an integrationist of white women and black men, one of the most taboo adult relationships. The judgments that surround any interracial couple: *White girls who are into black dudes are sluts. White dudes aren't enough for them; only a big-dicked black guy can satisfy them. Black dudes who are into white girls don't like their kind. And, well, you know how they treat their women: they abuse them; any white girl who goes out with one is a masochist.* The air in America is thick with these misconceptions, and in the seventies it was thicker still. Plays and films like “A Taste of Honey,” “A Patch of Blue,” “Deep Are the Roots,” “All God’s Chillun’ Got Wings,” and “The Great White Hope” gave a view of the black man as both destroyer and nursemaid to a galaxy of white women who were sure to bring him down. But no real relationships exist in these works. The black male protagonists are more illustration than character. (Though they make excellent theatrical agitprop: what a surplus of symbols dangles from their mythic oversized penises!) In his work, Pryor was one of the first black artists to unknot the narrative of that desire and to expose it. In life he had to live through it as painfully as anyone else.

When Jennifer Lee first slept with Pryor, she told me, she touched his hair and he recoiled: its texture was all the difference in the world between them. That difference is part of the attraction for both members of interracial couples. “Ain’t no such thing as an ugly white woman,” says a character in Eldridge Cleaver’s 1968 polemic, “Soul on Ice.” In some ways Pryor found it easier to be involved with white women than with black women: he could blame their misunderstandings on race, and he could take advantage of the guilt they felt for what he suffered as a black man.

Yet, while Pryor may have felt both attracted by and ashamed of his difference from Lee, he also pursued her through all his drug blindness and self-absorption because he saw something of himself in her. “What no one gets,” Lee told me, “is that one of the ways Richard became popular was through women falling in love with him—they saw themselves in him, in his not fitting in, the solitude of it all, and his willingness to be vulnerable as women are. And disenfranchised, of course, as women are.” That black men and white women were drawn to each other through their oppression by white men was a concept I had first seen expressed in the feminist Shulamith Firestone’s book “The Dialectic of Sex.” There is a bond in oppression, certainly, but also a rift because of it—a contempt for the other who marks you as different—which explains why interracial romance is so often informed by violence. Cleaver claimed that he raped white women because that was the only kind of empowerment he could find in his brutal world. At times, Pryor directed a similar rage at Jennifer Lee, and she, at times, returned it.

Life in the eighties: Pryor gets up. Does drugs. Drives over to the Comedy Store to work out a routine. Has an argument with Jennifer after a party. Maybe they fly to Hawaii. Come back in a week or so. Some days, Pryor is relaxed in his vulnerability. Other days, he tries to throw her out of the car. Richard’s Uncle Dickie says about Jennifer, who is from an Irish family, “Irish are niggers turned inside out.” Richard says about Jennifer, “The tragedy was that Jennifer could keep up with me.” And she did. They married in 1981. They divorced in 1982.

With Lee, Pryor took the same trajectory that he had followed with many women before her. He began with a nearly maudlin reverence for her beauty and ended with paranoia and violence. In “Tarnished Angel,” Lee describes Pryor photographing her as she was being sexually attacked by a drug dealer he hung out with—a lowlife in the tradition of the people he had grown up with. Pryor could be

brutally dissociative and sadistic, especially with people he cared about: he did not separate their degradation from his own. He was also pleased when Lee was jealous of the other women he invariably became involved with. And when she left him, she claims, he stalked her.

Pryor got married again in 1986, to Flynn BeLaine, two years after she'd given birth to his son Steven. Lee moved back to New York, where she wrote a challenging review of Pryor's film "Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling," for *People*:

Well, Richard, you blew it. I went to see "Jo Jo Dancer." . . . I went looking for the truth, the real skinny. Well, guess what? It wasn't there. . . . How sad. After all, it was you who was obsessed by the truth, be it onstage or in your private life. . . . You had no sacred cows. That's why I fell in love with you, why I hung in through the wonder and madness. . . . Listen to your white honky bitch, Richard: Ya gotta walk it like you talk it or you'll lose that beat.

But later the same year, when Lee interviewed Pryor for *Spin*, they had reached a kind of détente:

LEE: What about the rage, the demons?

PRYOR: They don't rage much anymore.

LEE: Like a tired old monster?

PRYOR: Very tired. He hath consumed me.

LEE: Has this lack of rage quieted your need to do standup?

PRYOR: Something has. I'm glad it happened *after* I made money.

Pryor had gone sober in 1983 and he soon recognized that, along with alcohol, he needed to relinquish some of the ruthless internal navigations that had given his comedy its power. He performed live less and less. There were flashes of the old brilliance: on Johnny Carson, for example, when he responded to false rumors that he had *AIDS*. And when his public raised its fickle refrain—“He’s sick, he’s washed up”—he often rallied, but in the last eight years of his performing life he became a more conventional presence.

Pryor divorced Flynn in 1991, and in 1994 he placed a call to Jennifer. He was suffering from degenerative multiple sclerosis, he told her, and wouldn’t be able to work much longer. “He said, ‘My life’s a mess. Will you help me out?’ ” she recalls. “I thought long and hard about it. . . . I wasn’t sure it would last, because Richard loves to manipulate people and see them dance. But, see, he can’t do that anymore, because he finally bottomed. That’s the only reason Richard is allowing his life to be in any kind of order right now.”

Lee came back to Pryor in July of that year. “When I got there, he was in this ridiculous rental for, like, six thousand dollars a month,” she told me. “Five bedrooms, seven bathrooms. Honey, it was classic. You couldn’t write it better.” Lee helped him to find a smaller house in Encino, and she has cared for him since then. He has two caregivers and is bathed and dressed in a collaborative effort that has shades of Fellini. He spends his days in a custom-made wheelchair, while others read to him or give him physical or speech therapy. Every Friday, he goes to the movies. According to Lee, he can speak well when he wants to, but he doesn’t often want to. “Sometimes he’ll say, ‘Leave me the fuck alone, Jenny,’ ” she tells me, laughing. “Just the other day, Richard was sitting, staring out the window, and his caregiver said, ‘Mr. Richard, what are you thinking about?’ He said, ‘I’m thinking about how much money I pay all you motherfuckers.’ ” He doesn’t see his children much, or his other ex-wives, or the people he knew when he still said things

like “I dig show business. I do. . . . I wake up every morning and I kiss it. Show business, you fine bitch.”

BLUE MOVIE

“Was that corny?” Lily Tomlin said to me one afternoon last winter when I told her I’d heard that certain CBS executives hadn’t wanted her to kiss Pryor good night at the close of “Lily,” back in 1973. After all, Pryor was then a disreputable black comic with an infamous foul mouth, and Lily Tomlin had just come from “Laugh-In,” where she had attracted nationwide attention. Tomlin kissed him anyway, and it was, I think, the first time I had ever seen a white woman kiss a black man—I was twelve—and it was almost certainly the first time I had ever seen Richard Pryor.

Tomlin and I were sitting with Jane Wagner, her partner and writer for thirty years, in a Cuban restaurant—one of their favorite places in Los Angeles. Tomlin and Wagner were the only white people there.

“We just loved Richard,” Tomlin told me. “He was the only one who could move you to tears. No one was funnier, dearer, darker, heavier, stronger, more radical. He was everything. And his humanity was just glorious.”

“What a miracle ‘Juke and Opal’ got on,” Wagner said. “The network treated us as if we were total political radicals. I guess we were. And they hated Richard. They were so threatened by him.”

CBS had insisted that Tomlin and Wagner move “Juke and Opal” to the end of the show, so that people wouldn’t switch channels in the middle, bringing down the ratings. “It threw the whole shape of the show off,” Tomlin recalled in a 1974 interview. “It made ‘Juke and Opal’ seem like some sort of Big Message, which is not what I intended. . . . I wasn’t out to make any, uh, heavy statements, any real judgments.”

“Everybody kept saying it wasn’t funny, but we wanted to do little poems. I mean, when you think of doing a drug addict in prime time!” Wagner told me. And what they did *is* a poem of sorts. It was one of the all too few opportunities that Tomlin had to showcase, on national television, the kind of performance she and Pryor pioneered.

“Lily and Richard were a revolution, because they based what they did on real life, its possibilities,” Lorne Michaels, the producer of “Saturday Night Live,” told me. “You couldn’t do that kind of work now on network television, because no one would understand it. . . . Lily and Richard were the exemplars of a kind of craft. They told us there was a revolution coming in the field of entertainment, and we kept looking to the left, and it didn’t come.”

It is odd to think that Richard Pryor’s period of pronounced popularity and power lasted for only a decade, really—from 1970 to 1980. But comedy is rock and roll, and Pryor had his share of hits. The enormous territory he carved out for himself remains more or less his own. Not that it hasn’t been scavenged by other comedians: Eddie Murphy takes on Pryor’s belligerent side, Martin Lawrence his fearful side, Chris Rock his hysteria, Eddie Griffin his ghoulish goofiness. But none of these comedians approaches Pryor’s fundamental strangeness, vulnerability, or political intensity. Still, their work demonstrates the power of his influence: none of them would exist at all were it not for Richard Pryor. The actor Richard Belzer described him to me as “the ultimate artistic beacon.” “It was like he was the sun and we were planets,” Belzer said. “He was the ultimate. He took socially complex situations and made you think about them, and yet you laughed. He’s so brilliantly funny, it was revelatory. He’s one of those rare people who define a medium.”

According to Lee, Pryor has been approached by a number of artists who see something of themselves in him. Damon Wayans and Chris Rock wanted to star in a film version of Pryor’s life. The

Hughes Brothers expressed interest in making a documentary. In 1998, the Kennedy Center gave Pryor its first Mark Twain Prize, and Chevy Chase, Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, and others gathered to pay tribute to him. Pryor's written acceptance of the award, however, shows a somewhat reluctant acknowledgment of his status as an icon: "It is nice to be regarded on par with a great white man—now that's funny!" he wrote. "Seriously, though, two things people throughout history have had in common are hatred and humor. I am proud that, like Mark Twain, I have been able to use humor to lessen people's hatred!"

In some ways, Pryor probably realizes that his legendary status has weakened the subversive impact of his work. People are quick to make monuments of anything they live long enough to control. It's not difficult to see how historians will view him in the future. An edgy comedian. A Mudbone. But will they take into account the rest of his story: that essentially American life, full of contradictions; the life of a comedian who had an excess of both empathy and disdain for his audience, who exhausted himself in his search for love, who was a confusion of female and male, colored and white, and who acted out this internal drama onstage for our entertainment. ♦



Hilton Als, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of "[God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin](#)."

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Love Trouble Is My Business

By [Veronica Geng](#)

September 23, 1984



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Francis X. Clines, in the *Sunday Times* . . . : “President Reagan resembled a bashful cowboy the other day when he was asked about the apparent collapse of the ‘Star Wars’ talks with the Soviet Union. . . . At his side, murmuring something through the fixed smile that seems required of American political spouses, Mrs. Reagan was overheard prompting him: ‘We’re doing everything we can.’ . . . Out there in . . . the President’s mountainside retreat, subjects such as the Soviet Union seem to haunt Mr. Reagan the way vows to read Proust dog other Americans at leisure.”

This may be the only time in history in which the words “Mr. Reagan” and “read Proust” will appear in the same sentence.

—*Geoffrey Stokes in the Village Voice.*

I glanced over at the dame sleeping next to me, and all of a sudden I wanted some other dame, the way you see Mr. Reagan on TV and all of a sudden get a yen to read Proust. Not that she wasn't attractive, with rumpled blond curls and a complexion so transparent you could read Proust through it—that is, as long as her cute habit of claiming a tax deduction for salon facials didn't turn up in a memo to Mr. Reagan from some I.R.S. stool pigeon. It was taking her a little more time to wake up than it would take Mr. Reagan's horse to read Proust. After I'd showered and shaved and put on an old pair of pants that wouldn't lead anybody to believe my tailor was unduly influenced by having read Proust, I went back over to the bed, where I wasn't exactly planning to say my prayers —Mr. Reagan or no Mr. Reagan.

“Mr. . . . Reagan . . . ?” she whispered, fluttering her lashes, and I trusted the dazed quizzical act about as much as if she'd told me she could read Proust without moving her lips. I slugged her a couple of times, and I'd have slugged her a couple of more times if something hadn't told me I'd get a colder shoulder than a cult nut insisting you could read Proust as anagrams predicting the end of the world during the Administration of Mr. Reagan.

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She chuckled insanely, like Mr. Reagan looped on something you wouldn't want to drink while you read Proust. Then she touched me, with the practiced efficiency of a protocol officer steering some terribly junior diplomat through a receiving line to meet Mr. Reagan; funny, but I got the idea she wasn't suggesting we curl up and read Proust. As her hand slid along my thigh, I noticed that she wore a ring with a diamond the size of the brain of a guy who read Proust all the time, and if I'd been Mr. Reagan I'd have been dumb

enough to buy her another one to go with it. But the distance between a private eye's income and Mr. Reagan's was a gaping chasm big enough to crawl into and read Proust.

I wondered if Mr. Reagan worked this hard for his dough, as I maneuvered her into the Kama Sutra position known as "Too Busy to Read Proust."

I woke to the phone shrilling in my ear like the hot line warning Mr. Reagan that ten thousand Russian missiles hurtling over Western Europe weren't R.S.V.P.ing for a let's-get-together-once-a-week-and-read-Proust party. I let it ring, hoping the caller would decide to quit and go reread Proust, and wondering why dames always ran out on me without saying goodbye—why they didn't stick around with loyal wifely fixed smiles the way they did for hotshots like Mr. Reagan. Then I found myself getting a little weepy at a sentimental popular tune that was drifting through the venetian blinds:

The connoisseur who's read Proust does it,
Mr. Reagan with a boost does it,
Let's do it, let's fall in love.

Read Proust, where each *duc* and *comte* does it,
Mr. Reagan with a prompt does it,
Let's do it, let's fall in love.

I've read Proust wished that he had done it
Through a small aperture,
Has Leningrad done it?
Mr. Reagan's not sure.

Some who read Proust say Odette did it,
Mr. Reagan with a safety net did it.
Let's do it, let's fall in love.

“*Cherchez la femme*,” I said to myself—a phrase I’d picked up on a case where the judge gave clemency to a homicidal maniac for having read Proust—and then I went out in the rain to a bookstore where I usually browsed for dames, and found one perusing Mr. Reagan’s latest autobiography. Just for fun, I looked over her shoulder and read:

For a long time, before I met Nancy, I used to go to bed early. ♦

Veronica Geng contributed to The New Yorker for nearly two decades. She died in 1997.

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Corrections



By [Calvin Trillin](#)

July 27, 2014



Illustration by Bendik Kaltenborn

JANUARY 14

Because of an editing error, an article in Friday's theatre section transposed the identifications of two people involved in the production of "Waiting for Bruce," a farce now in rehearsal at the Rivoli. Ralph W. Murtaugh, Jr., a New York attorney, is one of the

play's financial backers. Hilary Murtaugh plays the ingénue. The two Murtaughs are not related. At no time during the rehearsal visited by the reporter did Mr. Murtaugh "sashay across the stage."

MARCH 25

Because of some problems in transmission, there were several errors in yesterday's account of a symposium held by the Women's Civic Forum of Rye on the role played by slovenliness in cases of domestic violence. The moderator of the symposium, Laura Murtaugh, is not "a divorced mother of eight." Mrs. Murtaugh, the president of the board of directors of the Women's Civic Forum, is married to Ralph W. Murtaugh, Jr., an attorney who practices in Manhattan. The phrase "he was raised with the hogs and he lived like a hog" was read by Mrs. Murtaugh from the trial testimony of an Ohio woman whose defense against a charge of assault was based on her husband's alleged slovenliness. It did not refer to Mrs. Murtaugh's own husband. Mr. Murtaugh was raised in New York.

APRIL 4

An article in yesterday's edition on the growing contention between lawyers and their clients should not have used an anonymous quotation referring to the firm of Newton, Murtaugh & Clayton as "ambulance-chasing jackals" without offering the firm an opportunity to reply. Also, the number of hours customarily billed by Newton, Murtaugh partners was shown incorrectly on a chart accompanying the article. According to a spokesman for the firm, the partner who said he bills clients for "thirty-five or forty hours on a good day" was speaking ironically. There are only twenty-four hours in a day. The same article was in error as to the first name and the background of one of the firm's senior partners. The correct name is Ralph W. Murtaugh, Jr. There is no one named Hilary Murtaugh connected with the firm. Ralph W. Murtaugh, Jr., has at no time played an ingénue on Broadway.

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APRIL 29

Because of a computer error, the early editions on Wednesday misidentified the person arrested for a series of armed robberies of kitchen-supply stores on the West Side of Manhattan. The person arrested under suspicion of being the so-called “pesto bandit” was Raymond Cullom, twenty-two, of Queens. Ralph W. Murtaugh III, nineteen, of Rye, should have been identified as the runner-up in the annual Squash for Kids charity squash tournament, in Rye, rather than as the alleged robber.

MAY 18

Because of an error in transmission, a four-bedroom brick colonial house on Weeping Bend Lane, in Rye, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Ralph W. Murtaugh, Jr., was incorrectly listed in Sunday’s real-estate section as being on the market for \$17,500. The house is not for sale. Also, contrary to the information in the listing, it does not have flocked wallpaper or a round bed.

JUNE 21

In Sunday’s edition, the account of a wedding that took place the previous day at St. John’s Church in Rye was incorrect in a number of respects. The cause of the errors was the participation of the reporter in the reception. This is in itself against the policy of this newspaper, and should not have occurred. Jane Murtaugh was misidentified in two mentions. She was neither the mother of the bride nor the father of the bride. She was the bride. It was she who was wearing a white silk gown trimmed in tulle. The minister was wearing conventional ministerial robes. Miss Murtaugh should not have been identified on second mention as Mrs. Perkins, since she will retain her name and since Mr. Perkins was not in fact the groom. The number of bridesmaids was incorrectly reported. There were eight bridesmaids, not thirty-eight. Their dresses were blue, not glued. The bridegroom’s name is not Franklin Marshall. His

name is Emory Barnswell, and he graduated from Franklin and Marshall College. Mr. Barnswell never attended Emory University, which in any case does not offer a degree in furniture stripping. Mr. Barnswell's ancestor was not a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and was not named Hector (Boom-Boom) Bondini. The name of the father of the bride was inadvertently dropped from the article. He is Hilary Murtaugh. ♦



Calvin Trillin, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1963. His many books include “Jackson, 1964” and “About Alice.”

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Guy Walks Into a Bar

By [Simon Rich](#)

November 10, 2013



Illustration by Yann Kebbi

So a guy walks into a bar one day and he can't believe his eyes. There, in the corner, there's this one-foot-tall man, in a little tuxedo, playing a tiny grand piano.

So the guy asks the bartender, "Where'd he come from?"

And the bartender's, like, "There's a genie in the men's room who grants wishes."

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So the guy runs into the men's room and, sure enough, there's this genie. And the genie's, like, "Your wish is my command." So the

guy's, like, "O.K., I wish for world peace." And there's this big cloud of smoke—and then the room fills up with *geese*.

So the guy walks out of the men's room and he's, like, "Hey, bartender, I think your genie might be hard of hearing."

And the bartender's, like, "No kidding. You think I wished for a twelve-inch *pianist*?"

So the guy processes this. And he's, like, "Does that mean you wished for a twelve-inch penis?"

And the bartender's, like, "Yeah. Why, what did you wish for?"

And the guy's, like, "World peace."

So the bartender is understandably ashamed.

And the guy orders a beer, like everything is normal, but it's obvious that something has changed between him and the bartender.

And the bartender's, like, "I feel like I should explain myself further."

And the guy's, like, "You don't have to."

But the bartender continues, in a hushed tone. And he's, like, "I have what's known as penile dysmorphic disorder. Basically, what that means is I fixate on my size. It's not that I'm small down there. I'm actually within the normal range. Whenever I see it, though, I feel inadequate."

And the guy feels sorry for him. So he's, like, "Where do you think that comes from?"

And the bartender's, like, "I don't know. My dad and I had a tense relationship. He used to cheat on my mom, and I knew it was going on, but I didn't tell her. I think it's wrapped up in that somehow."

And the guy's, like, "Have you ever seen anyone about this?"

And the bartender's, like, "Oh, yeah, I started seeing a therapist four years ago. But she says we've barely scratched the surface."

So, at around this point, the twelve-inch pianist finishes up his sonata. And he walks over to the bar and climbs onto one of the stools. And he's, like, "Listen, I couldn't help but overhear the end of your conversation. I never told anyone this before, but my dad and I didn't speak the last ten years of his life."

And the bartender's, like, "Tell me more about that." And he pours the pianist a tiny glass of whiskey.

And the twelve-inch pianist is, like, "He was a total monster. Beat us all. Told me once I was an accident."

And the bartender's, like, "That's horrible."

And the twelve-inch pianist shrugs. And he's, like, "You know what? I'm over it. He always said I wouldn't amount to anything, because of my height? Well, now look at me. I'm a professional musician!"

And the pianist starts to laugh, but it's a forced kind of laughter, and you can see the pain behind it. And then he's, like, "When he was in the hospital, he had one of the nurses call me. I was going to go see him. Bought a plane ticket and everything. But before I could make it back to Tampa . . ."

And then he starts to cry. And he's, like, "I just wish I'd had a chance to say goodbye to my old man."

And all of a sudden there's this big cloud of smoke—and a beat-up Plymouth Voyager appears!

And the pianist is, like, “I said ‘old man,’ not ‘old van’!”

And everybody laughs. And the pianist is, like, “Your genie’s hard of hearing.”

And the bartender says, “No kidding. You think I wished for a twelve-inch *pianist*? ”

And as soon as the words leave his lips he regrets them. Because the pianist is, like, “Oh, my God. You didn’t really want me.”

And the bartender’s, like, “No, it’s not like that.” You know, trying to backpedal.

And the pianist smiles ruefully and says, “Once an accident, always an accident.” And he drinks all of his whiskey.

And the bartender’s, like, “Brian, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

And the pianist smashes his whiskey glass against the wall and says, “Well, I didn’t mean *that*. ”

And the bartender’s, like, “Whoa, calm down.”

And the pianist is, like, “Fuck you!” And he’s really drunk, because he’s only one foot tall and so his tolerance for alcohol is extremely low. And he’s, like, “Fuck you, asshole! Fuck you!”

And he starts throwing punches, but he’s too small to do any real damage, and eventually he just collapses in the bartender’s arms.

And suddenly he has this revelation. And he’s, like, “My God, I’m just like him. I’m just like him.” And he starts weeping.

And the bartender's, like, "No, you're not. You're better than he was."

And the pianist is, like, "That's not true. I'm worthless!"

And the bartender grabs the pianist by the shoulders and says, "Damn it, Brian, listen to me! My life was hell before you entered it. Now I look forward to every day. You're so talented and kind and you light up this whole bar. Hell, you light up my whole life. If I had a second wish, you know what it would be? It would be for you to realize how beautiful you are."

And the bartender kisses the pianist on the lips.

So the guy, who's been watching all this, is surprised, because he didn't know the bartender was gay. It doesn't bother him; it just catches him off guard, you know? So he goes to the bathroom, to give them a little privacy. And there's the genie.

So the guy's, like, "Hey, genie, you need to get your ears fixed."

And the genie's, like, "Who says they're broken?" And he opens the door, revealing the happy couple, who are kissing and gaining strength from each other.

And the guy's, like, "Well done."

And then the genie says, "That bartender's tiny penis is going to seem huge from the perspective of his one-foot-tall boyfriend."

And the graphic nature of the comment kind of kills the moment.

And the genie's, like, "I'm sorry. I should've left that part unsaid. I always do that. I take things too far."

And the guy's, like, "Don't worry about it. Let's just grab a beer. It's on me." ♦

Simon Rich is the author of several books, including the story collection “*Glory Days*. ”

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LGA–ORD

By [Ian Frazier](#)

June 30, 1980

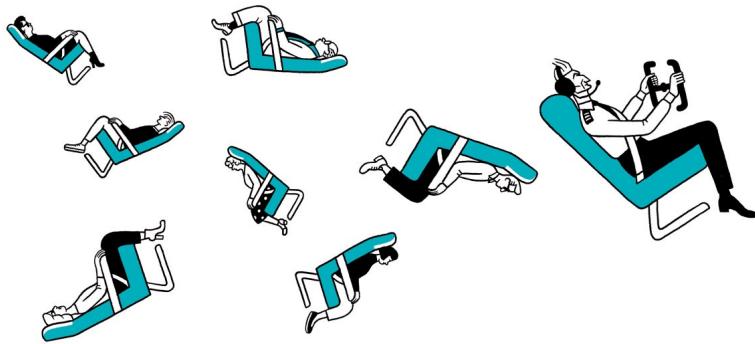


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Then, Beckett decided to become a commercial pilot. . . .

“I think the next little bit of excitement is flying,” he wrote to McGreevy. “I hope I am not too old to take it up seriously nor too stupid about machines to qualify as a commercial pilot.”

—“*Samuel Beckett*,” by *Deirdre Bair*.

Gray bleak final afternoon ladies and gentlemen this is your captain your cap welcoming you aboard the continuation of Flyways flight 185 from nothingness to New York’s Laguardia non non non non non non nonstop to Chicago’s Ohare and on from there in the passing of gray afternoons to empty bleak eternal nothingness again with the Carey bus the credit-card machine the Friskem metal

detector the boarding pass the in-flight magazine all returned to tiny bits of grit blowing across the steppe for ever

(*Pause*)

Cruising along nicely now.

(*Pause*)

Yes cruising along very nicely indeed if I do say so myself.

(*Long pause*)

Twenty-two thousand feet.

(*Pause*)

More from the Archive

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Extinguish the light extinguish the light I have extinguished the No Smoking light so you are free to move about the cabin have a good cry hang yourselves get an erection who knows however we do ask that while you're in your seats you keep your belts lightly fastened in case we encounter any choppy air or the end we've prayed for past time remembering our flying time from New York to Chicago is two hours and fifteen minutes the time of the dark journey of our existence is not revealed, you cry no you *pray* for a flight attendant you pray for a flight attendant a flight attendant comes now cry with reading material if you care to purchase a cocktail

(*Pause*)

A cocktail?

(Pause)

If you care to purchase a piece of carrot, a stinking turnip, a bit of grit our flight attendants will be along to see that you know how to move out of this airplane fast and use seat lower back cushion for flotation those of you on the right side of the aircraft ought to be able to see New York's Finger Lakes region that's Lake Canandaigua closest to us those of you on the left side of the aircraft will only see the vastness of eternal emptiness without end

(Pause)

(Long pause)

(Very long pause)

(Long pause of about an hour)

We're beginning our descent we're finished nearly finished soon we will be finished we're beginning our descent our long descent ah descending beautifully to Chicago's Ohare Airport *ORD ORD ORD ORD* seat backs and tray tables in their full upright position for landing for ending flight attendants prepare for ending it is ending the flight is ending please check the seat pocket in front of you to see if you have all your belongings with you remain seated and motionless until the ending until the finish until the aircraft has come to a complete stop at the gate until the end

(Pause)

When we deplane I'll weep for happiness. ♦

Ian Frazier is a staff writer at The New Yorker. He is the author of “Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York’s Greatest Borough.”

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Fiction

- **[The World According to “Peanuts”](#)**

By Art Spiegelman | A visit to Charles Schulz as he prepares to retire from fifty years of drawing his beloved comic strip.

- **[“Chablis”](#)**

By Donald Barthelme | My wife has been wanting a dog for a long time. I have had to be the one to tell her that she couldn't have it. But now the baby wants a dog, my wife says.

Comic Strip

The World According to “Peanuts”

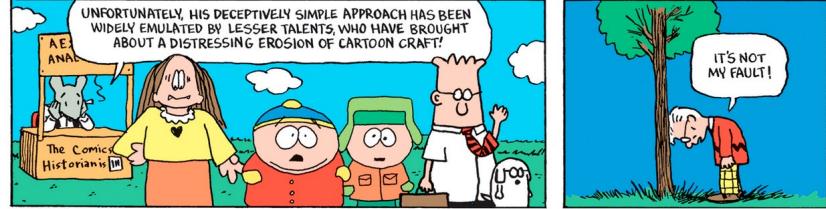
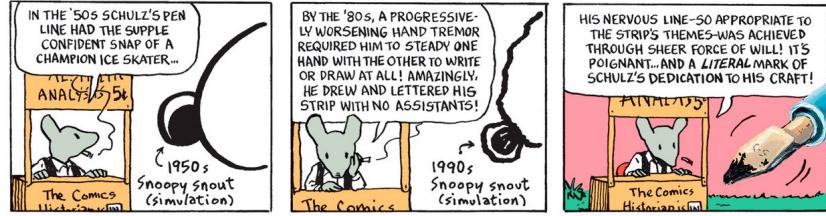
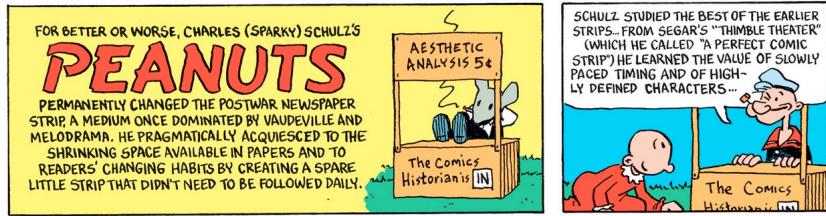
A visit to Charles Schulz as he prepares to retire from fifty years of drawing his beloved comic strip.

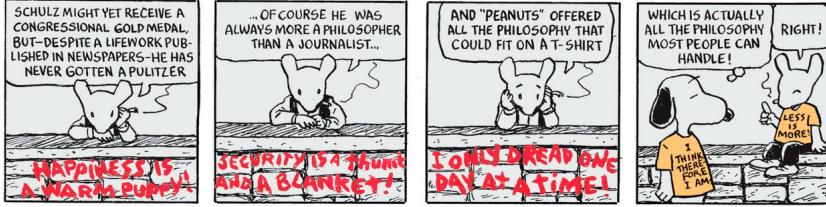
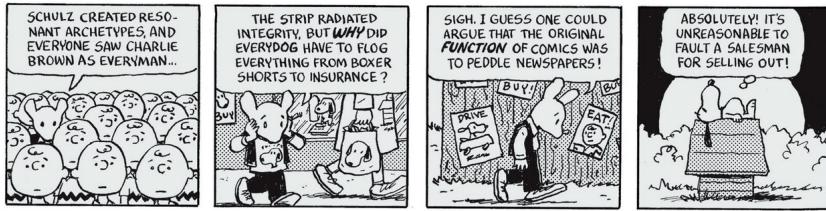
By Art Spiegelman

February 6, 2000

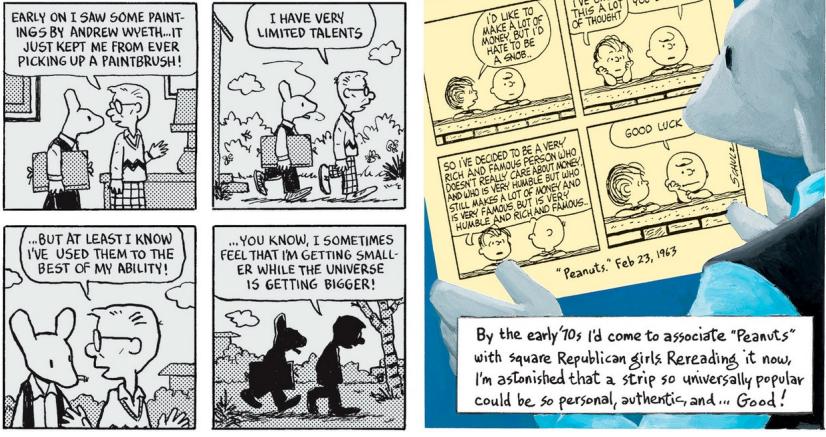


Out of the blue, I got a friendly letter from Charles Schulz inviting me to meet him sometime. Determining that it wasn't a hoax, I visited Snoopy Place, in Santa Rosa, last August and was soon engaged in a theological conversation.





Talking with Sparky was, fittingly enough, a bit like finding oneself inside a "Peanuts" episode.



An earlier version of this Comic Strip misquoted a line from Umberto Eco.

Art Spiegelman has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1992. He is the author of several books, including "*Maus*".

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[Fiction](#)

Chablis

By [Donald Barthelme](#)

December 4, 1983



Illustration by Ben Hickey

My wife wants a dog. She already has a baby. The baby's almost two. My wife says that the baby wants the dog.

My wife has been wanting a dog for a long time. I have had to be the one to tell her that she couldn't have it. But now the baby wants a dog, my wife says. This may be true. The baby is very close to

my wife. They go around together all the time, clutching each other tightly. I ask the baby, who is a girl, “Whose girl are you? Are you Daddy’s girl?” The baby says, “Momma,” and she doesn’t just say it once, she says it repeatedly, “Momma Momma Momma.” I don’t see why I should buy a hundred-dollar dog for that damn baby.

The kind of dog the baby wants, my wife says, is a cairn terrier. This kind of dog, my wife says, is a Presbyterian like herself and the baby. Last year the baby was a Baptist—that is, she went to the Mother’s Day Out program at the First Baptist twice a week. This year she is a Presbyterian because the Presbyterians have more swings and slides and things. I think that’s pretty shameless and I have said so. My wife is a legitimate lifelong Presbyterian and says that makes it O.K.: way back when she was a child she used to go to the First Presbyterian in Evansville, Illinois. I didn’t go to church, because I was a black sheep. There were five children in my family and the males rotated the position of black sheep among us, the oldest one being the black sheep for a while while he was in his D.W.I. period or whatever and then getting grayer as he maybe got a job or was in the service and then finally becoming a white sheep when he got married and had a grandchild. My sister was never a black sheep, because she was a girl.

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Our baby is a pretty fine baby. I told my wife for many years that she couldn’t have a baby because it was too expensive. But they wear you down. They are just wonderful at wearing you down, even if it takes years, as it did in this case. Now I hang around the baby and hug her every chance I get. Her name is Joanna. She wears Oshkosh overalls and says “no,” “bottle,” “out,” and “Momma.” She looks most lovable when she’s wet, when she’s just had a bath and her blond hair is all wet and she’s wrapped in a

beige towel. Sometimes when she's watching television she forgets that you're there. You can just look at her. When she's watching television, she looks dumb. I like her better when she's wet.

This dog thing is getting to be a big issue. I said to my wife, "Well you've got the baby. Do we have to have the damn dog too?" The dog will probably bite somebody, or get lost. I can see myself walking all over our subdivision asking people, "Have you seen this brown dog?" "What's its name?" they'll say to me, and I'll stare at them coldly and say, "Michael." That's what she wants to call it, Michael. That's a silly name for a dog and I'll have to go looking for this possibly rabid animal and say to people, "Have you seen this brown dog? Michael?" It's enough to make you think about divorce.

What's that baby going to do with that dog that it can't do with me? Romp? I can romp. I took her to the playground at the school. It was Sunday and there was nobody there, and we romped. I ran, and she tottered after me at a good pace. I held her as she slid down the slide. She groped her way through a length of big pipe they have there set in concrete. She picked up a feather and looked at it for a long time. I was worried that it might be a diseased feather but she didn't put it in her mouth. Then we ran some more over the patched bare softball field and through the arcade that connects the temporary wooden classrooms, which are losing their yellow paint, to the main building. Joanna will go to this school someday, if I stay in the same job.

I looked at some dogs at Pets-A-Plenty, which has birds, rodents, reptiles, and dogs, all in top condition. They showed me the cairn terriers. "Do they have their prayer books?" I asked. This woman clerk didn't know what I was talking about. The cairn terriers ran about two ninety-five per, with their papers. I started to ask if they had any illegitimate children at lower prices, but I could see that it would be useless and the woman already didn't like me, I could tell.

What is wrong with me? Why am I not a more natural person, like my wife wants me to be? I sit up, in the early morning, at my desk on the second floor of our house. The desk faces the street. At five-thirty in the morning, the runners are already out, individually or in pairs, running toward rude red health. I'm sipping a glass of Gallo Chablis with an ice cube in it, smoking, worrying. I worry that the baby may jam a kitchen knife into an electrical outlet while she's wet. I've put those little plastic plugs into all the electrical outlets, but she's learned how to pop them out. I've checked the Crayolas. They've made the Crayolas safe to eat—I called the head office in Pennsylvania. She can eat a whole box of Crayolas and nothing much will happen to her. If I don't get the new tires for the car, I can buy the dog.

I remember the time, thirty years ago, when I put Herman's mother's Buick into a cornfield, on the Beaumont highway. There was a car coming at me in my lane, and I didn't hit it, and it didn't hit me. I remember veering to the right and down into the ditch and up through the fence and coming to rest in the cornfield and then getting out to wake Herman and the two of us going to see what the happy drunks in the other car had come to, in the ditch on the other side of the road. That was when I was a black sheep, years and years ago. That was skillfully done, I think. I get up, congratulate myself in memory, and go in to look at the baby. ♦

Donald Barthelme, who died in 1989, was the author of numerous books, including the novel “Snow White” and the story collection “Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts.”

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The Critics

- **[How “Saturday Night Live” Breaks the Mold](#)**

By Michael J. Arlen | NBC’s new sketch show is in opposition to the rituals of mass-entertainment television.

- **[Charlie Chaplin and the Business of Living](#)**

By Adam Gopnik | Chaplin’s epochal fame has tended to obscure the influences and instincts that infused his art with childlike purity.

- **[Chelsea Handler Sexes Up Late Night](#)**

By Nancy Franklin | Attractive women and comedy aren’t thought to go together, but Handler’s career seems to indicate some kind of shift.

- **[“Funny Girl” Is a Terrible Movie with a Performance of Greatness](#)**

By Pauline Kael | The Broadway musical is a corrupted form, but Barbra Streisand conceals nothing, making dialogue sound improvised and highlighting the performative nature of stardom.

[The Air](#)

How “Saturday Night Live” Breaks the Mold

NBC’s new sketch show is in opposition to the rituals of mass-entertainment television.

By [Michael J. Arlen](#)

November 17, 1975



The original 1975 cast. From left: Chevy Chase, Laraine Newman, John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Garrett Morris, Jane Curtin, and Dan Aykroyd.

Photograph by Edie Baskin

This is probably as good a time as any to say a few words about an appealing new comedy program called "Saturday Night," which is broadcast at eleven-thirty each Saturday night by NBC and is definitely not to be confused with "Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell," which comes on earlier in the evening on ABC. The Cosell show and NBC's "Saturday Night" are both mainly live, but there is a crucial difference between the two programs. Cosell's show (as is the case with nearly all entertainment on commercial television), for all its "liveness," is based on and defined by the standard vocabulary of American show business. Some of the acts are well done, others are not so well done. The essential texture of the show, however, depends on that strange fantasy language of celebrity public relations which has been concocted for the public by mass-entertainment producers and stars and in recent years has become almost formalized as a kind of national version of a modern courtier style. It is the language of kisses blown, of "God bless you"s, of "this wonderful human being," of "a sensational performer and my *very dear* personal friend," and of "You're just a beautiful audience!"—in short, the language of celebrity "hype" or, alternatively (though it amounts to the same thing), of celebrity "roast." It is the language of not daring to let anything alone to stand by itself, the language of bored artifice—perhaps a contemporary equivalent of dandyism and powdered wigs.

Much of the appeal of "Saturday Night" lies in its contrast with this ubiquitous show-business language. Its format, like that of most comedy programs, consists of a familiar assembly of skits, songs, and monologues, but the spirit of the material is in opposition to conventional show business—especially to the rituals of mass-entertainment television. To begin with, the physical presentation of the program is deliberately untidy and informal. The shows are broadcast from a cavernous, undecorated NBC working studio that has been filled largely with young people. In contrast to most studio-audience programs, in which the audience setup is rigid and theatrelike, the effect here is that of a huge, darkened, lively TV

cabaret. Each Saturday night, the program has a different host (though neither “host” nor “m.c.” seems quite the right word for the part)—for instance, George Carlin, the comedian, or Paul Simon (formerly of Simon and Garfunkel), or Candice Bergen. The hosts don’t do very much in the way of “hosting”—in the conventional TV manner of promoting themselves or the guests—but are content mainly to sit around, providing a periodic focus for the loosely tied-together skits and sometimes telling a story or two or, as in Paul Simon’s case, singing a few songs. As you might guess, the feel of the show is decidedly loose—loose but with generally able performances.

Skit humor usually defies cold description, so I won’t try much of it here. On the recent Saturday with Candice Bergen as host, the show began with a not very brilliant takeoff of a Presidential news conference, which showed the actor impersonating President Ford bumping his head on the lectern, fumbling with his drinking water, and repeatedly falling down. But then there was a crisply done parody of a TV news program, with the President once again featured (“President Ford has just asked for the resignation of his son Jack”), concluding with a lunatic “News for the Hard of Hearing,” which consisted of a newsman yelling items of news very loud. There was also a funny takeoff of one of the local-TV-station counter-editorials. Also a takeoff of a “Black Perspective” program, with the black host attempting to interview a harebrained white girl on the subject of a book she had just written about black ghetto life. Also an amiable but fairly juvenile parody of “Jaws.” Also some funny parodies of TV commercials, and some filmed parodies of TV serials: “Medical Season,” about a heartless, incompetent old doctor; and “The Three of Us,” about an ineptly arranged girl-boy-girl modern living arrangement. Also a freewheeling talk-show interview with a couple of demented kiwi trappers. Also a skit by a fine young comedian, Andy Kaufman, about a TV “guest” who couldn’t manage to perform properly, or at all. And so forth.

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As I said, you can't convey much of anything about comedy skits by describing them. The truth is that it's a funny show and has enough comic spirit behind it so that even an actress of no notable comic expertise, such as Candice Bergen, can work along easily with the program. Still, it's not really the gross tonnage of jokes in the skits which makes "Saturday Night" worth looking at. What is attractive and unusual about the program is that it is an attempt, finally, to provide entertainment on television in a recognizable, human, non-celebrity voice—and in a voice, too, that tries to deal with the morass of media-induced show-business culture that increasingly pervades American life.

I was going to add that the show is topical, but "topical" has become another of those contemporary vogue words, and, as an automatic value-enhancing adjective, it no longer means what it used to mean. In mass entertainment nowadays, just about everyone is topical. Hardly anyone tells mother-in-law jokes anymore. Mary Tyler Moore is topical. Howard Cosell is topical. Even Dean Martin is topical. Any comedian within twelve feet of a microphone makes jokes about government, politicians, even Presidents. Last year, when President Ford dispensed *win* buttons, the airwaves crackled with professional show-business jokes on the subject. Bob Hope, for one, has consistently made jokes on subjects drawn from the news pages of the newspapers—many of them funny jokes. But Bob Hope (as is true of most of his colleagues) is primarily a joke machine. Jokes are rattled off almost promiscuously: some are about the C.I.A., others about golf—or the energy crisis or football or the White House swimming pool or Bing Crosby. These jokes are topical in the contemporary sense of being about everyday, or "relevant," topics, but they have no center. What does the person telling the joke really think? Bob

Hope, for one, rigorously plays the part of a man who doesn't think. He is the conventional professional entertainer. From the audience's vantage point, he had no political sensibility and no personal life. In a way, there is a certain purity to the Hope approach. Everything in the world becomes a potential joke, which can be fashioned crisply, neatly, with detached expertise, and then told *purely*, unmarred by the kind of synthetic personality ("My wife is the kind of woman who . . .") that lesser comedians attempt to inject into their routines. The Hope style (like that of his professional heirs, such as Rowan and Martin, and even Johnny Carson) is basically a triumph of technological comedy. There is a laugh in anything, but the comedian is not necessarily connected to, or disconnected from, the source of laughter. He is a processor of jokes. He stands apart.

This technological approach to humor is difficult to carry off, because each of the isolated, impersonal jokes has to work right. Most conventional mass-entertainment comedians have neither the established presence nor the timing nor the joke writers of a Bob Hope, and so they are usually compelled to create half-realized and synthetic dramatic personalities for themselves: Red Skelton's punch-drunk prizefighter, or Jackie Gleason's roguish fat man, or Lucille Ball's zany housewife, or Milton Berle's life of the party, or Carol Burnett's hysterical wallflower, and so on. Indeed, for years most television comedy has been frozen in these ancient and synthetic molds: of a playacted dramatic "personality" (where part of the fun, supposedly, lies in knowing that Carroll O'Connor isn't really a bigot, or that Carol Burnett isn't really demented) or else of the detached, technical precision of mass-entertainment topical joke-telling (where the comedian appears to be talking about a topic of current interest but a personally felt texture of concern is rarely acknowledged). This isn't to say that a number of conventional mass-entertainment comedy routines aren't funny, or that there won't always be a place, or a need, for a clown simply to play a clown. But during all the years that commercial television

(with a few exceptions, notably Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca) has remained stuck in its conventional postures of synthetic comedy several wholly new approaches to popular humor have been evolving, which network television (ever the guardian of the Public Weal) has resolutely ignored.

In a sense, there have been two key modern developments in comedy. One originated in America in the postwar period, and on the small, peripheral stages of Chicago and San Francisco: Nichols and May with Chicago's Compass Players (some of whose members evolved into the Second City troupe), Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, and Lenny Bruce at the "hungry i" in San Francisco. These performers were first acclaimed by the young, and for their qualities of "topicality" and "relevance." Their style was loose, conversational, personal. That was a period when middle-class America was beginning a nearly mass communion with psychiatry, or, certainly, with the forms or language of the psychiatric experience, and it was the personal gropings of the psychiatric patient—the stumbling, sensibility-prone, identity-obsessed assertions—that formed both the underpinning of the new humor and the material to play off on. Many Americans were attempting to find their "real selves." The new entertainers, in addition to playing off on these searches after identity, attempted to gain the good will and regard of their audiences by revealing—or, anyway, acknowledging—*their* "real selves." One could almost say that the basis for the new comedy routines was an absence of detachment, an absence of conventional professionalism—an absence of the traditional notions of compartmentalization. Much of the American public was trying to deal with new concepts of "wholeness" and "relatedness" in private life and public life: public officials and ordinary men and women were to be accountable for their whole and interconnected lives—not just for one visible corner of them. The new American comedians seemed to be saying that they would now be accountable for their jokes. For instance, an old-style comedian might make a joke about the C.I.A.: "The C.I.A. is in

plenty of hot water lately. Why, things are so bad down there they sent a self-destructing letter to one of their agents and it came back ‘Opened by Mistake.’ ” Superficially, this might be termed a topical joke, but its topicality is virtually meaningless, being buried in traditional show-business paraphernalia. The comedian *uses* the C.I.A. as a fashionable topic, but he doesn’t touch it or connect to it. And the audience (which nonetheless thinks for itself) is left out in the cold except for the automatic ha-haing at the punch line. Nor is it true to say that the old-style comedian would spoil the simple clownlike purity of his position if he were to take a personal point of view—by admitting to his own reality. For the fact is that by claiming to view the “topic” of the C.I.A. only as the detached subject of a disconnected wisecrack he is already being “political.” A new-style comedian—for example, Mort Sahl—not only would connect a topic such as the C.I.A. to his own point of view but, by cumulatively and publicly uncovering his various points of view on various topics, would unfold his own “real self” and present *that* to the audience. Whatever else it might feel in the grip of the new humorous self-consciousness, the growing audience for the new comedians was not being left out in the cold.

The other key trend or tributary which fed into modern comedy developed mainly in England, also in the postwar period—first in the radio “Goon Show” routines of Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan, then with such educated lunacies as “Beyond the Fringe,” and more recently with “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.” Superficially, the humor of these English actor-comedians seemed to be based largely, and restrictively, on English concepts and English culture. But their considerable success in America has shown that what was actually being exported was two other ingredients. The first was a fairly ancient English comic standby: the eccentric, and the concept of eccentricity. For some time, American Anglophiles had been fond of remarking affectionately, and perhaps a trifle condescendingly, on “the English eccentric.” Since Dickens, eccentricity had been regarded as an approved, even

a unique, feature of English life and literature. American eccentricity was not thought to properly exist as such. Except for a handful of absentminded college professors and an occasional inventor, American literature had a rather scant record of American eccentricity. Important or established Americans were thought to be too busy, or too important or established, to serve as suitable vessels for eccentricity. Times changed, however, and, with them, national assertions and national self-knowledge. As a result, in recent years American films and literature have fairly teemed with examples of American eccentricity, and what was once thought of as a uniquely English habit of detecting lunacy in seemingly stable Englishmen has turned out to be an extremely successful export item—applicable equally to Foreign Office and State Department, to addled noble lords and demented Pentagon generals. Indeed, it was one of the original Goons, Peter Sellers, who played that quintessential Cold War warrior Dr. Strangelove. The other ingredient originally exported by the new English comedians can perhaps best be described as a comedy of surplus education. In England, for generations (such being the dutifulness of the English school systems), a major part of the population has consistently been taught vast quantities of useless knowledge. In America, the mass acquisition of useless knowledge didn't really come into its own until the great surge in "humanist" college studies after the Second World War, but since then it has been proceeding apace. When Nichols and May used to do improvised parodies of Pirandello, they were connecting to this subterranean pool of expensively acquired surplus information, in the same way that "Monty Python" has appealed to a randomly overinformed audience with its film about the Holy Grail.

What all this has to do with NBC's "Saturday Night" is simply this. For the most part, in the past twenty years commercial television has largely ignored the important new trends in modern comedy—which are important not as trends but as basic ways of trying to view and organize experience. To deny the public a consistent view

of modern art, say, would be to deny people an important way of looking at and identifying with their world. The same is true (perhaps on a different plane) with comedy—the so-called “comic vision.” Whether as a result of the caution of advertisers or of the personal prejudices of network bosses, mass-entertainment television comedy has been firmly rooted in the past—a synthetic, Hollywood-style, show-business past—despite the fact that the new forms of comedy have demonstrated a considerable popular appeal. It is not a matter of wishing to replace Bob Hope with an “élitist,” in-group kind of humor. The popular audience continues to adore Bob Hope, but it is also true that for years substantial segments of this same popular audience have been sneaking away in droves from its Hoopla Show Business Comedy Hours in order to commune with the rising number of lesser-known, more personal, more political, more sexual, more connectively humorous comedians who for the most part have existed outside the carefully patrolled guard fence of network-television entertainment.

Thus, what is noteworthy about “Saturday Night,” and why I commend it, is not the result of any spectacular, star-studded brilliance on its part; indeed, it has no real stars, though I hope that the ensemble of actor-comics who perform most of the skits will make individual names for themselves. It is, as the saying goes, an *uneven* program, with ups and downs and too many commercial breaks. But it is a direct and funny show, which seems to speak out of the real, non-show-business world that most people inhabit—and it exists. One wonders (without expecting an answer) what took it so long. One wonders, too, what simple human pleasures the simple, human TV viewer might some day conceivably experience if network television—that grinning, gun-toting, wisecracking (“You’re just a *beautiful* audience!”), still youthful courtesan—should ever start peeling off the rest of the cosmetics. ♦

A previous version of this article mischaracterized the actions of a character in the sketch about Gerald Ford, and also the

background of the female character in the “Black Perspective” sketch.

Michael J. Arlen was on staff from 1957 to 1990. His books include the memoir “*Passage to Ararat*,” which was first published in the magazine and won a National Book Award.

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Charlie Chaplin and the Business of Living

Chaplin's epochal fame has tended to obscure the influences and instincts that infused his art with childlike purity.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

August 4, 1996



Chaplin combined the sexual magnetism of a leading man with a comedian's self-deprecation. What happens when a romantic stumbles into clowning?

Photograph by Strauss-Peyton Studio

The job of World's Most Popular Entertainer is not one that seems to lead to a modest estimation of one's powers and a limited sense of self-worth. Elvis, a decade into his tenure, announced that he

had seen Christ and Antichrist battling in the clouds above Graceland; John Lennon, six years into owning one-fourth of the title, was writing ballads about his imminent crucifixion; and Michael Jackson, keeping up the messianic ambitions, felt compelled to invent not just a new race but a whole new gender, of which he could be the only member.

That Charles Chaplin, who got this strange job first and held it longest, never went much beyond planning to cast himself in a movie about the life of Napoleon is, in a way, a tribute to his underlying sense of reality. (He had the stills made for the Napoleon picture; he looks good in the uniform.) Reading Joyce Milton's new biography of Chaplin, though, which bears the title of "Tramp" (HarperCollins), you wouldn't know that there was much of anything peculiar or out of the ordinary about Chaplin's career. To the familiar biographer's sin of underestimating the type to which her subject belongs, and attributing the habits of a whole class to the traumas of a warped individual, she adds the more original sin of completely missing what in Chaplin's career was so peculiar that it's a miracle he managed to emerge even as a normal mixed-up, egocentric artist.

Everybody calls Chaplin's childhood in London, in the eighteen-nineties, "Dickensian," meaning rough-and-tumble, but, as Chaplin's own wonderful account of his early years, in "My Autobiography," reveals, it was Dickensian in a much more specific sense. Like Dickens, who was sent out from his happy family for three scarring months at the blacking warehouse, Chaplin experienced deprivation as a series of traumas, not as a steady grind. He was a brilliant and hypersensitive little boy, who adored his mother, Hannah. ("Mother was a soubrette on the variety stage, a mignonne in her late twenties, with fair complexion, violet-blue eyes and long light-brown hair that she could sit upon," Chaplin recalled as an old man, and there is the voice of a little boy in love.) Even after her stage career faded, she

somehow managed to keep up an air of eccentric gentility for her two sons, Charlie and Sydney. (Their father, a music-hall star, flitted in and out of their lives, depending on the state of his bank account and on his alcohol level.)

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Chaplin's memories of his mother's cooking and storytelling and sewing and playacting—her performing for one person, the little boy alone—are the obvious sources of the powerful images of pleasure and intimacy and just-us-twoness which haunt his movies. But she was intermittently crazy, and when she was the boys did time in an orphanage and a workhouse. Then one day, when Charlie was twelve, he found her in the garret, stark mad, and had to lead her by the hand to the infirmary for the insane. She never recovered. The family was thrown on the mercies of late-Victorian charity: the mother ended up in a public lunatic asylum. (It is typical of Milton's insensitivity to her subject's experience that when Chaplin, fifty years afterward, makes a passionate, if slightly scattered, defense of the British National Health Service, she puts it down to mere political posturing.)

With Chaplin, as with Dickens, the horrible fall was all the more horrible because it lasted a relatively short time: you got a glimpse of the abyss without learning that you could make a life there if you had to. Chaplin experienced poverty as pain; he took it personally. This made it hurt, even though the worst was over quickly. Soon after his mother's breakdown, he became a child star, triumphing in the role of Billy, the leader of the Baker Street Irregulars, in William Gillette's production of "Sherlock Holmes." Chaplin's entire life breaks into three simple parts: enchanted childhood, childhood nightmare, stardom.

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So his profession saved him young, and it may be that the key to understanding Chaplin is to remember what that profession was, and what an enveloping world it created. Milton makes very heavy weather of the notion that Chaplin's Gypsy grandmother may have exposed him to a secret Gypsy life, turning him into a kind of Romany Marrano—an idea that would have been pie to the grownup Chaplin, so it's hard to believe he would have kept it secret for a moment. But Chaplin did belong to a tribe, and one just as strange as that of the Gypsies, with laws and habits of its own. It was the tribe of the British music-hall performer, of the lower reaches of the legitimate stage. His parents never had him baptized; they just put a notice in a theatrical paper. Performing wasn't just what he did; it was all he knew—and the kind of performing he knew, which lay on the very edge of polite entertainment, always had to make sure it would be seen as Art. Almost everything about the grownup Chaplin—the oscillations between petty miserliness and public generosity, the “intellectual” enthusiasms, the love of a tone of vague moral uplift (his mother sang patriotic songs), even the swell dressing—was part of the manners of the only life he had known. It was a deep and old culture: read the Crummles chapters in “Nicholas Nickleby,” about a nineteenth-century British theatrical family, and you will know all you need to know about Chaplin's psychology—and even his left-wing politics. (Had the Infant Phenomenon of the Crummles family grown up and gone to Hollywood, she, too, would eventually have been lying by the pool at Lillian Hellman's enlisting people to support the Loyalists in

Spain.) If you actually *read* the incoherent pro-Russia speeches Chaplin made in the forties, which got him into such trouble, you can see that he might just as well have been singing patriotic songs about the Boer War. Getting worked up about foreign wars was one of the things that a good performer did, like owning a hundred suits and a country estate. Even Chaplin's pomposities were commonplaces of the culture. The world of British music hall, revue, and pantomime was a working-class one with an aristocratic ethic—the place where you could pass from low to high without doing time in the purgatory of the middle class. So the people it produced, if it got them early enough, were more blue-blooded than the blue bloods. (Noël Coward is another example.)

If Chaplin's personality was fairly standard theatrical stuff, his genius wasn't. He was always a star. When he arrived in America, in 1910, he was already, at twenty-one, the leading comedian in Fred Karno's troupe, at the top of the music-hall ladder. Within weeks of joining Mack Sennett's Keystone Film Company, in California, in 1914, he appeared as the character we call the Tramp in an improvised six-minute short, tacked on to the head of a documentary about olive oil. A year later, his face was the most famous in the world, known from Tokyo to New York to Paris, and he was about to become a millionaire many times over.

This mad ascent has happened enough times since to make it seem normal, but it had never happened before. Why Chaplin? Like most of his other biographers, Milton emphasizes the split between Chaplin the “innocent” onscreen funnyman and Chaplin the offscreen Lothario. But if you look at his films in order from 1914 to 1918 what strikes you—even before the limitless, acrobatic energy of his performances, or his Mozartean gifts as a mime—is how uncannily beautiful a young man he is, and what sexual presence he has onscreen. The large, liquid eyes, the cherubic curls, the violinist's hands, the quick gentle gestures, and, above all, the sudden, radiant four-alarm smile—he was one of the handsomest

comedians who ever lived, and he probably wouldn't have become a clown at all if he hadn't stumbled into it. (In fact, what happens to a romantic who stumbles into clowning became more or less his subject.) Right from the beginning, he never missed an opportunity for grace—not comic, reverse-spin grace, either, but plain old-fashioned grace, evident in the improbable perfection with which his character roller-skates, eats, dances. (Alistair Cooke, whose memoir of Chaplin in his book “Six Men” is still the most vivid portrait of him, recalled the sheer pleasure of watching him eat a stack of pancakes thirty years after it happened.) The sexual magnetism of a leading man combined with the self-deprecating manners of a comedian—it's a formula that worked for Cary Grant, and later for Tom Hanks. But Chaplin invented it.

His early style was wonderfully fresh, too, and not because it was a “natural” style but because the stylizations it depended on weren't the customary stylizations of the clown. Chaplin loved the bravura clichés of nineteenth-century ham acting—the grand manner of his actor heroes, Irving and Booth and Tree. They were second nature; he had been absorbing them since he was six, and for him they were what acting was. (In his autobiography, written after a lifetime of seeing everyone from Duse to Brando, he picks out for high honors three Victorian actors in three Victorian melodramas: Irving in “The Bells,” Tree in “Svengali,” and someone named Martin Harvey in something called “A Cigarette-Maker's Romance.”) But he didn't play the manner straight. His comic style depended on taking the grandiloquent, rhetorical gestures and using them to describe an unheroic life. In a seemingly straightforward set piece, like the rescue from the orphanage van, in “The Kid,” what is startling is how much life Chaplin gets out of the Victorian clichés by adding a stumble here and a flat-footed skid there, and by making them part of a beautifully orchestrated pattern of assertion and withdrawal, a pattern possible only, perhaps, in a medium as fluid as the movies. He plays most of the rescue sequence away from the camera: looking down as he scuttles

across the roofs to keep up with the van on the street below; burying his head in the little boy's face as he kisses him after he rescues him; and, most memorably, playing with his back turned to the camera for the entire climax of the chase, as, in a moment of surprised triumph, he frightens off the orphanage keeper with a ferocious shake of his shoulders and feet. This self-effacement gives a greater presence to the high-ham moments, which must have come right out of "A Cigarette-Maker's Romance"—his unforgettable agonized face, for instance, as he realizes that they are taking the kid away. Chaplin wasn't a clown who wanted to play Hamlet. He was a clown who played Hamlet all along, in another costume.

To James Agee's generation, that of the forties, this combination of high and low made Chaplin a god, the perfect modern artist: funny, ambitious, serious, and, above all, humane. To the post-Kaelites now in power, he is everything bad: too arty, too sentimental, too theatrical, too genteel. A revisionist biography was bound to arrive. Yet, even if that was the only kind of biography left to write, Milton's is particularly narrow. She wants to revise a part of the record that most people have forgotten exists. To explain Chaplin's perfectionism, she announces flatly that he suffered from a form of manic depression or bipolar illness. After recounting the frenzied, inspired twelve months of work that produced "The Gold Rush," she comments that "another name for what he was going through would be hypomania, a mood disorder sometimes characterized by increased creativity and goal-directed behavior." But, with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, she is mostly concerned with making it clear that Chaplin's ejection from America in the McCarthy period was, if not exactly deserved, then at least not the act of political persecution that Chaplin and his authoritative, meticulous biographer David Robinson would like to make it. Milton, who, with Ronald Radosh, wrote the sad, convincing 1983 "Rosenberg File," demonstrating that the Rosenbergs really were

spies, is out to put Chaplin in more or less the same dock: he was a Red, and he had it coming to him.

The sexual scandals that Chaplin kept getting caught up in helped feed the notion that he was dangerous, and preceded his political troubles in the forties, a time when a close relation between the Sex Fiend and the Red was taken for granted. Chaplin's sexual exploits occupy the second third of Milton's book. Though Chaplin is most famous for chasing young girls, he seems to have nailed pretty much everything in skirts, without prejudice. (His trouble was that he was always getting his girlfriends pregnant, apparently managing to persuade them that he couldn't use a condom, because as a child he had been traumatized by rubber.) The list of his conquests, as Milton works it out—in his autobiography Chaplin was gallantly discreet—includes Pola Negri, Louise Brooks, Marion Davies (who was also sleeping with William Randolph Hearst), and most of his leading ladies. (Milton, while chronicling all this activity, explains, inevitably, that he was probably homosexual.)

Chaplin's politics are Milton's preoccupation, however, and, where Richard Attenborough's "Chaplin" and Robinson's biography followed Chaplin himself in suggesting that he was a warmhearted liberal who was persecuted by a paranoid F.B.I., Milton makes a reasonably convincing case that he was a Red—or, at least, a good example of what used to be meant by the phrase "fellow-traveller." He probably recut the end of "Modern Times" at Party orders, for instance, and the last, incoherent speech in "The Great Dictator" was at least partly fashioned by a Party sympathizer and Chaplin mentor named Rob Wagner.

Reading Milton, though, you would have no idea of just how many people in Hollywood, and in New York and London and Paris, for that matter, had been seduced by Communism—or that, of all the people who were, Chaplin was among the most resistant to the corruption of his art. As Milton herself admits, he was of

practically no use to the Party. “The Great Dictator” couldn’t even be shown in Russia, because, whatever Chaplin says at the end, its satiric target is obviously the grandiosity of all tyrants. In general, Chaplin’s Communist mentors found him an exasperating pupil. They kept trying to teach him that it was all about class, and he kept telling them that what mattered was pluck. Eventually, they gave up.

And surely there is still a distinction to be made between those who were drawn to an evil ideology because it justified their own worst instincts and those whose best instincts made them vulnerable to an evil ideology. It is hardly fair to crucify Charlie Chaplin for not seeing what was invisible to Edmund Wilson, too. In fact, the sad part is that Chaplin became a radical only because he thought it would make him look like an intellectual. His Communism was probably the one significant thing in his life that had nothing to do with his early trauma. It was pure social climbing, a way of getting up there with the highbrows.

Milton, having arraigned her subject as a chauvinist pig and a Stalinist lackey, suggests that these two things were what led to the decline in his work around the time of “Monsieur Verdoux” (1947). But a great performer doesn’t work from ideas, he works from his body and soul, and if there is a decline in Chaplin’s work it is for a simpler reason. He started so early that when he was mature he looked middle-aged. Even by the time of “The Gold Rush,” in 1925, he is looking a bit weary; and in “City Lights” (1931) he is clearly a graying tramp. The snap and crackle of nervous energy that fill the Tramp’s moments have, like Astaire’s drumming and toe-tapping, hardened into mannerism; his mouth keeps scrunching up to one side, mechanically—a tic that in “Monsieur Verdoux” he worked to death. Chaplin’s character, perhaps uniquely among great comic inventions, is, crucially, young: “As I Walked Out One Morning” is his theme. Whereas W. C. Fields and Groucho were

old and knowing even when they were young, the Tramp is a youth, almost a kid.

It is this connection to childhood that will probably guarantee Chaplin's immortality. Although his highbrow reputation has faded, he remains magnetic to the innocent moviegoer. There is at least one young movie lover at large who has been watching Chaplin's early films, on a kind of continual-screening basis, since he was a year and a half old. He can't understand a lot of the humor, of course, but he is mesmerized by the emotional structure. Every moment in Chaplin is propelled by a human insight that has been given the form of a joke, and every joke drives the story forward. The stories are not narrative lines that string the gags together; they have the urgent intensity of fairy tales, and their subjects are the permanent ones: the need to be accepted, the bond between parent and child, unrequited love, pleasure in small objects and domestic routine.

Though at the end Chaplin became awkwardly self-conscious, his greatest moments are played not for the camera but for himself—or for a childhood audience, an audience of one. The original beginning of "City Lights" is one of the loveliest and least known of these moments. It appears in Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's wonderful documentary "Unknown Chaplin"—seven sustained minutes of solo comedy in which nothing happens. Chaplin is standing on a subway grating in front of a department-store window, and he idly begins pushing a little piece of wood through one of the holes in the grate with his cane. It won't quite go—keeps sticking. He tries pushing down on one end. Nothing doing—it keeps sticking, holding fast, popping up. He walks a bit, tries the other end with his cane. Still no luck. Then (frowning a little, pushing back his derby, putting his feet in first position) he tries with his shoe. By now, this business has gone from an idle recreation to a hobby and on to a quest. An officious fat woman straddles the piece of wood while she looks in the window; Chaplin

is so absorbed in his job that he pushes his foot between her legs—wood won't fall. A window dresser working in the window begins to shout advice—"Push it in the middle!"—and eventually a crowd gathers around the oblivious Tramp, until a policeman appears, drawn by the crowd, and takes him by the shoulder. Chaplin protests his innocence, just touching the bit of wood with his cane to show the problem, and at that moment it silently and smugly vanishes through the grating, all by itself.

Nothing happens: there is none of the abstract development that we associate with great silent comedy. This is just behavior, for its own sake. And a child's behavior, too, not in the sentimental sense of being filled with "wonder" but in the real, practical sense of suggesting the way that all of life—waking up, having breakfast, eating soup, strolling—can be broken down into jobs. Like a child, Chaplin never works but is always busy. Pushing the bit of wood through the grating, eating the shoe in "The Gold Rush," taking apart the clock in "The Pawnshop," even eating beans in "The Immigrant" ("Wow, that one's hot. Wow, that one is, too!") display a happy child's absorption in the business of living, in the difficulty and the importance of just putting one foot in front of the other. ♦



Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 1986. His books include *"The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery."*

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Chelsea Handler Sexes Up Late Night

Attractive women and comedy aren't thought to go together, but Handler's career seems to indicate some kind of shift.

By [Nancy Franklin](#)

May 17, 2010



Chelsea come lately: with good looks and grossness, the E! host has muscled her way into the boys-only comedy club.

Illustration by Robert Rasko

The power of the people made itself felt in a rewarding way in the past few months, after a Facebook petition was created calling for Betty White to host “Saturday Night Live.” Eventually, more than half a million people signed, and, in a move of great good sense and great good humor, Lorne Michaels, the show’s producer, duly invited White (or, rather, re-invited her—she had been asked several times before). The result was a lot of fun: an eighty-eight-year-old woman, with a sixty-year television career, kicking some energy and professionalism into a show that, while technically not dead, stubbornly refuses to really live. White obeys all the rules of good behavior except when it comes to what she says; you just don’t expect someone with her grandmotherly sparkle to be quite so wicked and dirty.

Attractive women and comedy aren’t thought to go together, because—supposedly—attractive women don’t need to be funny. This was one of the notions that Christopher Hitchens put forward in an eye-roller of a piece titled “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” in *Vanity Fair* three years ago; for starters, the theory doesn’t take into account the fact that men and women are human beings first, with individual backgrounds and existential agendas that are not aimed exclusively at attracting sexual partners. Yet attractiveness is something that women performers are forced to deal with in a way that men aren’t. There are nowhere near as many women as men in the field of comedy, and the female comedians who do make it tend to be examined closely for what their appearance and their performances “say” about women. That may, or may not, be changing. In a piece in the *Times* last month about Chelsea Handler, Jay Leno said, “What I love about Chelsea is that she shows we’ve reached a point where comedy is comedy—it’s not male comedy or female comedy.” Most women comics and comedy writers would laugh at that statement rather than with it, but Handler’s career so far seems to indicate some kind of shift. (And she has many people to thank for this, including Ellen DeGeneres and Kathy Griffin, each of them fearless in her own

way yet able to move into the mainstream, and Sarah Silverman, whose Comedy Central series was just cancelled.)

Chelsea Handler is, as it happens, at the high end of attractiveness. She has blond hair, blue eyes, and, at thirty-five, is fit without being crazily so; she comes across as an aging but still active California surfer girl, even though she's from suburban New Jersey. Her looks are certainly not divorced from her considerable appeal or success. Handler has had a nightly half-hour talk show on E! for two and a half years ("Chelsea Lately" is on at the same time as "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," on Comedy Central), she does standup tours, and her third book, "Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang," hit the best-seller list at No. 1 when it came out, in March. (She likes to mention that she beat out Karl Rove for the top spot.) Her second book, "Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea," also reached No. 1. Both titles reflect an aspect of her humor: something borrowed, something blue. The new book's title is a lame play on "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," but the previous one created something new by breaking something old: it brushed aside the earnestness of Judy Blume's most famous young-adult novel, "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," and replaced it with party-girl wildness and a robust disregard for the consequences—what Handler has called "an attitude of utter disrepair."

More from the Archive

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Handler has earned a place in history as only the second woman to have a late-night comedy talk show—the first, of course, was Joan Rivers, whose brief stint in late night is remembered more for Johnny Carson's reaction to it than for anything she did or didn't do on her show. Rivers was a regular guest host on the "Tonight Show" at the time, and Carson felt so betrayed by her stepping up to compete with him that he never spoke to her again. Last fall,

Wanda Sykes started a Saturday-night talk show on Fox (it was cancelled last week, after one season), and Joy Behar began a nightly prime-time talk show on HLN; Behar's show is rerun late at night, but it's more an alternative to Larry King than a comedy show. Handler didn't come out of nowhere, though if you're a certain age it may seem that she did—I had never heard of her until a couple of years ago, and I should have. In 2007, she and several other women starred in a Web series called "In the Motherhood," which consisted of short sketches based on stories sent in by real people about the comic situations that women find themselves in. "In the Motherhood" was the basis of a network series, which used a different cast, and tanked. (Handler wasn't in the TV show because "Chelsea Lately" was already under way.) She had also performed well as a prankster in a hidden-camera show on Oxygen called "Girls Behaving Badly."

In the same *Times* article in which Leno declared the differences between the sexes over, Robert Morton, who produced David Letterman's show for years, said, "When there is a decision to be made about replacing somebody on a big network show, I guarantee Chelsea will be up there on the list." Handler is a year younger than Jimmy Fallon, the other late-night host in her age group; they're both about the age that Letterman was when he began at NBC. But, while Morton's comment may flatter, it ultimately means nothing: networks haven't given much sign recently of being interested in women as writers, performers, or hosts—or, by the way, viewers. (Handler used to live with Ted Harbert, the head of entertainment at Comcast, which owns E!; he has a track record of creativity in the business, and was instrumental in getting Handler her show. They broke up a few months ago.)

Handler makes her living as a comedian and host, but she may be a better actor and writer. Her comedy is beyond raunchy; she's almost single-mindedly determined to give you too much

information about her sex life and her, and other people's, body parts. Whether that information is true is another thing; it's presented as though it were. Her first book, "My Horizontal Life: A Collection of One-Night Stands," opens with an anecdote about Handler's being dared by one of her sisters (Handler is the youngest of six children) to take a picture of their parents having sex. The first chapter of "Chelsea Chelsea Bang Bang" is about her delighted discovery of masturbation in third grade; it does not stint on detail.

The second book's opening is the most interesting—it's about Handler's getting trapped in a lie that she told her third-grade teacher and how it improved her life and then took it over. She forgot her homework one day, she says, and told her teacher that she had been in meetings with Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell for three nights, "negotiating my contract to play Goldie Hawn's daughter in the sequel to *Private Benjamin*." At first, the charade put an end to teasing from older girls who'd called her a dog, poor, and ugly, but then it became exhausting. Before the lie wore her out, however, it changed her life: "With that wave of confidence came the feeling that I was, in a way, impenetrable. I was the exact same person I had been the day before, but now I was being treated better and the older kids wanted to be friends with me. . . . I had found myself engaging, charismatic—even sublime at times. I had all the charm I believed a true movie star to have." And that's how an actor, if not a star, is born.

Handler doesn't seem to have the same interest in other people that she has in herself; it's unlikely that she would light up the way Jimmy Fallon did a few weeks ago when he had the Bee Gees (the two surviving ones, that is) on his show. Wit and self-centeredness, not enthusiasm, are the hallmarks of Handler's show, as is a certain kind of naughtiness. She'll use the word "chocolate" instead of "African-American" or "black"—a habit that has led some to call her a racist. She has an inexplicable obsession with dwarfs, calling

them “nuggets.” Her sidekick, Chuy Bravo, is a dwarf, and a former porn-movie performer. After a short monologue, during which she seems to be straining to read the cue cards, Handler talks to a panel of three comedians, some of them regulars on the show and most of them not destined to rise above C level. The often excruciating talk is generally of celebrities (which is, of course, what E! is all about), drinking, and genitalia. Next, Handler has a brief interview with a guest—sometimes an actor you don’t care about, sometimes an author peddling a book. Michael Lewis was on recently; she asked him to explain subprime mortgages, and, it has to be said, he did a terrible job of it. Occasionally, there are comic sketches that can only be called amateurish.

Handler’s show, although it’s a mere half hour long, drags. She gets away with it—her audience laughs at her every utterance, and she has more than two million followers on Twitter, where, on any given day, you may find a picture she has posted of her dog defecating or of her vacationing in the Bahamas. But Handler’s deadpan sharpness imperfectly masks her inability to put on a polished show. I’m not particularly eager to watch Conan O’Brien on his upcoming TBS show—my late-night choice these days is the brilliant Craig Ferguson and, to some extent and almost against my will, Letterman—but I suspect that O’Brien will do some damage to Handler’s numbers. Perhaps not; his presence in the same time slot may raise Handler’s profile even more. In any case, despite all her jokes about her vodka intake, she does seem to know what she’s doing; she’ll know better than anyone else when and if it’s time to stop being too sloppy by half. ♦

An earlier version of this article mistakenly stated that Chelsea Handler was the second woman in history to have a late-night talk show.

Nancy Franklin joined *The New Yorker* in 1978 and was the magazine’s television critic from 1998 to 2011.

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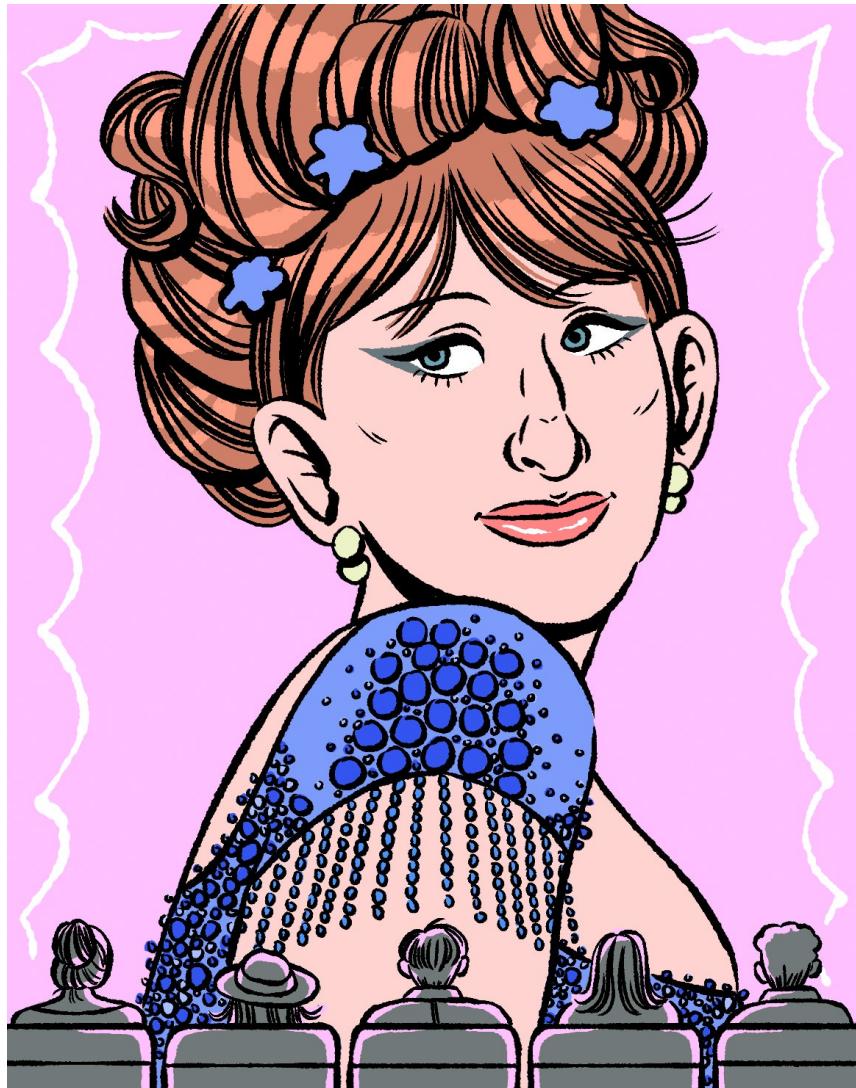
[The Current Cinema](#)

“Funny Girl” Is a Terrible Movie with a Performance of Greatness

The Broadway musical is a corrupted form, but Barbra Streisand conceals nothing in the film version, making dialogue sound improvised and highlighting the performative nature of stardom.

By [Pauline Kael](#)

September 20, 1968



*Talent makes Barbra Streisand much more beautiful than “pretty” people.
Illustration by Núria Just*

Barbra Streisand arrives on the screen, in “Funny Girl,” when the movies are in desperate need of her. The timing is perfect. There’s hardly a star in American movies today, and if we’ve got so used to the absence of stars that we no longer think about it much, we’ve also lost one of the great pleasures of moviegoing: watching incandescent people up there, more intense and dazzling than people we ordinarily encounter in life, and far more charming than the extraordinary people we encounter, because the ones on the screen are objects of pure contemplation—like athletes all wound up in the stress of competition—and we don’t have to undergo the frenzy or the risks of being involved with them. In life, fantastically gifted people, people who are driven, can be too much to handle; they can be a pain. In plays, in opera, they’re divine, and on the screen, where they can be seen in their perfection, and where we’re even safer from them, they’re *more* divine.

Let’s dispose at once of the ugly-duckling myth. It has been commonly said that the musical “Funny Girl” was a comfort to people because it carried the message that you do not need to be pretty to succeed. That is nonsense; the “message” of Barbra Streisand in “Funny Girl” is that talent is beauty. And this isn’t some comforting message for plain people; it’s what show business is all about. Barbra Streisand is much more beautiful than “pretty” people. This has not always been as true for the movies as for the stage; not handled carefully, some stage stars looked awful on the screen, so the legend developed that movie actors and actresses had to have “perfect” little features, and studio practices kept the legend going. But the banality of mere prettiness is a blight on American movies: Who can tell those faces apart? The Italian actresses, with their big, irregular features, became so popular here because we were starved for a trace of life after all those (usually fake) Wasp stereotypes. It’s unfortunate that in this case the (I assume unintentional) demonstration of how uninteresting prettiness is should be at the expense of Omar Sharif, who goes as far as to demonstrate that good looks can be nothing.

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Most Broadway musicals are dead before they reach the movies—the routines are so worked out they’re stiff, and the jokes are embalmed in old applause. But Streisand has the gift of making old written dialogue sound like inspired improvisation; almost every line she says seems to have just sprung to mind and out. Her inflections are witty and surprising, and, more surprisingly, delicate; she can probably do more for a line than any screen comedienne since Jean Arthur, in the thirties. There hasn’t been a funny girl on the screen for so long now that moviegoers have probably also got used to doing without one of the minor, once staple pleasures of moviegoing: the wisecracking heroines, the clever funny girls—Jean Arthur, of course, and Claudette Colbert, and Carole Lombard, and Ginger Rogers, and Rosalind Russell, and Myrna Loy, and all the others who could be counted on to be sassy and sane. They performed a basic comic function—they weren’t taken in by sham; they had the restorative good sense of impudence—and in the pre-bunny period they made American women distinctive and marvellous. The story and the situations of “Funny Girl” are even drearier than those of most big musicals, but we know the form is corrupt and we’re used to the conventions of rags-to-riches-to-price-of-fame, and it’s easy to take all that for granted and ignore it when a performer knows how to deliver a line. The form is corrupt but the spirit of the performer isn’t—that’s why a big, heavy, silly musical like this can still have some brute force in it. The comedy is the comedy of cutting through the bull, of saying what’s really on your mind. Such comedy was usually derived from urban Jewish humor, even in the thirties; now the Midwestern mask has been removed. Though this comedy is often self-deprecating (not hostile or paranoid), it’s *lightly* self-mocking, in a way that seems admirably suited to the genre. Here one can see

the experience and tact of a good, solid director like William Wyler. Younger, less capable, more anxious directors will permit anything for a laugh, and material like this could easily become raucous and embarrassing; we're never in danger in Wyler's hands, and that sense of security puts us in the right mood for laughter.

It is Streisand's peculiar triumph that in the second half, when the routine heartbreak comes, as it apparently must in all musical biographies, she shows an aptitude for suffering that those clever actresses didn't. Where they became sanctimonious and noble, thereby violating everything we had loved them for, she simply drips as unself-consciously and impersonally as a true tragic muse. And the tears belong to her face; they seem to complete it, as Garbo's suffering in "Camille" seemed to complete her beauty. Much stronger and more dominating than the earlier comediennes, she skirts pathos because her emotions are so openly expressed. She doesn't "touch" us for sympathy in the Chaplinesque way by trying to conceal her hurt. She conceals nothing; she's fiercely, almost frighteningly direct.

Whenever Streisand is not on the screen, the movie is stodgy, advancing the plot and telegraphing information in tedious little scenes of Sharif with servants, Sharif gambling, etc. We know that he's playing Nicky Arnstein, Fanny Brice's husband, but we can't make any sense of him. If shady gamblers are not going to be flashy and entertaining, what good are they as musical-comedy heroes? This Arnstein is too phlegmatic for a playboy and too proper for a gambler, and he seems not only devoid of humor but almost unaware of it. So what is supposed to draw him and a funny girl together? Sharif appears to be some sort of visiting royalty, with a pained professional smile to put the common people at their ease. The result is that no one seems to know how to talk to him. But then there's no one in the movie but Streisand anyway; the world of the movie is a stage full of stooges (with Walter Pidgeon stuck playing Ziegfeld like Mr. Miniver). In all these ways it's a

terrible movie, and though Streisand's makeup and costumes are beautiful and sumptuous (she sometimes resembles Monica Vitti), the other girls are not well served—partly, it appears, through a failure to decide whether the Ziegfeld girls should be glorified or parodied. (No definite tone is taken.) And the sets are not elegant and stylized; they're just bad period reconstructions. Sometimes all this gets in the way of enjoyment: the visual affront of square photography and a studio “alley” help to kill the “People” number (it's also strategically ill placed), and the shipboard sequences are damaged by their unappealing look. But one can fault everything else in the movie, too, and it doesn't really matter—not even the fact that the second half has to coast on the good will built up in the first. The crucial thing is that Wyler never makes the kind of mistake that Tony Richardson made in “The Entertainer” when he cut away from Laurence Olivier's great number to give us backstage business. We do not ask of a musical like “Funny Girl” that it give us the life story of Fanny Brice; we know that her story is simply the pretext for a show, a convention of our realistically rooted musical theatre, which seeks protection in great names or big properties from the past. What we do ask is that an actress who plays a star like Fanny Brice be able to live up to the image of a great star; if she isn't, we cannot accept the pretext, and the show is exposed as just an attempt to cash in on past glories. There is no such difficulty with “Funny Girl.” The end of the movie, seemingly in a long single take, is a bravura stroke, a gorgeous piece of showing off, that makes one intensely, brilliantly aware of the star as performer and of the star's pride in herself as performer. The pride is justified. ♦

A previous version of this article mischaracterized the sequence of the film's final take.

Pauline Kael wrote for *The New Yorker* from 1967 until her retirement, in 1991. She died in 2001.

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By Ogden Nash | “Like Burns, I have a weakness for the bottle; / Like Shakespeare, little Latin and less Greek.”

- **[“The Seven Ages of a Newspaper Subscriber”](#)**

By Phyllis McGinley | “From infancy, from childhood’s earliest caper, / He loved the daily paper.”

[Poems](#)

So That's Who I Remind Me Of

By [Ogden Nash](#)

October 16, 1942

When I consider men of golden talents,
I'm delighted, in my introverted way,
To discover, as I'm drawing up the balance,
How much we have in common, I and they.

Like Burns, I have a weakness for the bottle;
Like Shakespeare, little Latin and less Greek;
I bite my fingernails like Aristotle;
Like Thackeray, I have a snobbish streak.

I'm afflicted with the vanity of Byron;
I've inherited the spitefulness of Pope;
Like Petrarch, I'm a sucker for a siren;
Like Milton, I've a tendency to mope.

My spelling is suggestive of a Chaucer;
Like Johnson, well, I do not wish to die
(I also drink my coffee from the saucer);
And if Goldsmith was a parrot, so am I.

Like Villon, I have debits by the carload;
Like Swinburne, I'm afraid I need a nurse;
By my dicing is Christopher out-Marlowed,
And I dream as much as Coleridge, only worse.

In comparison with men of golden talents,
I am all a man of talent ought to be;

I resemble every genius in his vice, however henious. . . .

Yet I write so much like me.

Ogden Nash regularly contributed verse to The New Yorker for more than forty years. His last poem in the magazine was published the week after his death, in 1971.

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[Poems](#)

The Seven Ages of a Newspaper Subscriber

By [Phyllis McGinley](#)

January 11, 1946

From infancy, from childhood's earliest caper,
He loved the daily paper.

Propped on his grubby elbows, lying prone,
He took, at first, the Comics for his own.
Then, as he altered stature and his voice,
Sports were his single choice.

For a brief time, at twenty, Thought became
A desultory flame,
So with a critic eye he would peruse
The better Book Reviews.

Behold the bridegroom, then—the dazzled suitor
Turned grim commuter,
Learning without direction
To fold his paper to the Housing Section.

Forty enlarged his waistline with his wage.
The Business Page
Engrossed his mind. He liked to ponder well
The charted rise of Steel or Tel & Tel.

Choleric, pompous, and too often vexed,
The fifties claimed him next.
The Editorials, then, were what he scanned.
(Even, at times, he took his pen in hand.)

But witness how the human viewpoint varies:
Of late he reads the day's Obituaries.

Phyllis McGinley, who died in 1978, was a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of poetry and children's books.

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By Brooke Husic | A moderately challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, August 6, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.



By [Brooke Husic](#)

August 6, 2024



[Brooke Husic](#) is the crossword editor at Puzzmo.

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