

THE COMEDIANS



**Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels
and the History of American Comedy**

KLIPH NESTEROFF

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*For Marc M—
thanks for the boost*

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PREFACE

I'm sitting in a greenroom across from Mel Brooks on a Tuesday afternoon in February. Here on the Warner Bros. lot he is idling, waiting to be brought onstage by Conan O'Brien for a taping of the TV program *Conan*. The loss of his beloved wife nine years ago seems to have hushed his backstage tone, but in a half hour when his name is announced, Brooks will summon his unique comic energy and annihilate a young audience on the very lot where he made *Blazing Saddles* forty years ago.

Jokes have been made about Brooks and his longtime comedy partner Carl Reiner gaining on the 2000 Year Old Man, but at eighty-eight and ninety-two, respectively, they remain astoundingly perceptive. Like time travelers, they have transitioned from one generation to another. Reiner's first TV gig was in 1949 and Brooks had his in 1950, a time when owning a television was a luxury. Now Reiner has lived long enough to use Twitter as compulsively as a teenage girl and Brooks is hustling Blu-Rays and appearing on podcasts. Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner: seminal links to comedy's past and living in the world of the future.

Today Brooks is wearing a white-collared shirt and a rumpled black blazer. He drags his right palm across his face like a washcloth, a nervous tic of sorts. Comedian Jimmy Pardo speed-walks through the greenroom, reknitting a necktie, preparing for the audience warm-up. Tonight's episode of *Conan* is a tribute to Sid Caesar, the legendary comic actor who had recently died at the age of ninety-one.

In the 1950s Caesar was not just a top sketch comedian, but a revolutionary one. His two programs, *Your Show of Shows* (1950–1954) and *Caesar's Hour* (1954–1957), employed the most influential comedy writers of the twentieth century, including Brooks, Reiner, Larry Gelbart and Neil Simon. Conan O'Brien said Sid Caesar was the whole reason he got into comedy:

When I was a kid growing up in Brookline, Massachusetts, my father took me to the Hearststone Plaza in Brookline Village to see something called Ten from Your Show of Shows . . . He said, "You've got to see this." He took me, lights go down, I watch this, and when it was over I thought to myself, "I don't know what that guy is doing—but I want to do that."

Mel Brooks was the wunderkind behind the Sid Caesar sketches, and when the program went on the air in 1954 Brooks was a hot commodity. Over on a different comedy program, *The Red Buttons Show*, the ratings were plunging, and NBC thought Brooks might be able to help. Mel was hired to write and direct the sinking show. It would have been his directorial debut, fifteen years before *The Producers*. Instead Brooks quit after only six days. I had always wondered about the reason, and since we were both idling in the greenroom, I asked him.

"Mel . . . I've always wondered . . . In 1954 you were hired to direct *The Red Buttons Show* . . . It would have been your directorial debut, but it never happened . . ."

"Buttons, yeah. I don't think I ever did it."

"He had a reputation for being difficult . . ."

"Oh, yes. Yeah, there was only one comedian worse, only one person more difficult to work for."

"Who's that?"

"Jack Carter."

Back in 1950 Jack Carter had been Sid Caesar's Saturday night lead-in as the star of *The Jack Carter Show*. Another iron man of show business, Carter recently died at the age of ninety-three. He was nightclub powerhouse during the 1950s and 1960s, and a ubiquitous TV personality on everything from *The Judy Garland Show* to *The Odd Couple* to the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts*. Carter's first stand-up gig was in 1943, and he still appeared on programs like *New Girl* and *Shameless* until his death in 2015. Mel's suggestion that Jack could be difficult was accurate, and I knew it firsthand. Over the course of chronicling stand-up history I interviewed Jack Carter several times. I learned that his curmudgeon exterior masked a gentle but insecure man. Not long ago as I was leaving his home he shouted at me, "How does a total fucking nobody like *you* get a book deal?" It made me laugh. He was seldom happy about anything, but I couldn't help but love the guy.

I'd grown fond of many elderly comedians over the course of my research: some famous, some obscure, some funny, some cringe-worthy. I respected them all. I found their stories of Mob run-ins, hopeless bombs and triumphant evenings altogether fascinating. In the case of Brooks and Carter they were among the only men alive from whom I could get firsthand information about forgotten venues and faded comics.

One month after Mel Brooks and I chatted in the *Conan* greenroom, we faced each other again, this time at the Cinefamily theater in Los Angeles. I'd convinced Brooks to join me for an onstage interview about Sid Caesar followed by a 35mm screening of *Ten from Your Show of Shows*, the sketch film Conan O'Brien cited as his primary influence. I was pacing backstage when my phone rang. "Hi it's Mel! We're driving down the alley. Where is it? Is this it? Is that you? What? Where? Okay!" Brooks hopped out of a Town Car with his unlikely companion for the evening, the owner of Elvis Presley's Graceland. We casually went over some talking points while he sipped from his ginger ale and vodka and conversed about old, forgotten acts like Borrah Minevitch and His Harmonica Rascal. We were fully warmed up come showtime. The executive director of the theater welcomed the crowd and gave a preamble while we waited in the wings. Brooks whispered to me, "You gonna talk first?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll set it up and talk about Sid Caesar for three minutes . . ."

"Do five," said Mel.

I laughed. "What—now I'm opening for you?"

"Yeah, you're opening for me!"

"Ladies and germs!"

INTRODUCTION

Just tell the truth and people will laugh.

—Jonathan Winters

A comedian's success is almost always the result of a long, arduous struggle. Whether it was at vaudeville theater in the 1920s or a Mafia-run nightclub in the 1940s, a coffeehouse run by filthy beatniks in the 1950s or a comedy club used as a cocaine front in the 1970s, the comedian's struggle was remarkably similar through the generations.

An obstacle always seemed to lie in the way of achievement. Opium habits and corrupt managers plagued the vaudeville comedian's life. Nightclub curfews, conscription, anti-Semitism and mankind's impending doom hampered comics during World War II. In the 1950s there were comedians arrested for "lewd and obscene" material. In the late 1960s there were comedians listed as enemies of the state for their political opinions. No matter who you were or to which generation you belonged—you had to pay your dues. If you were launched into stardom without first putting in your time, you were sure to pay your dues later, when your career faded away.

While the facts of struggle were a constant in comedy, the style of performance was not. The art form evolved and shifted shape over a hundred years, so much so that comedy fans of the current generation find it nearly impossible to relate to comedians who dominated only decades before.

Familiar tropes have corrupted literature devoted to comedy. The "tears of a clown" idea has dominated comedy discourse even as giants like Johnny Carson and Jerry Seinfeld rejected the idea. "There are a lot of unhappy people driving bread trucks, but when it's a comedian people find it very poignant," said Seinfeld. "Some of them are in pain but I don't see that as a thread." Carson said, "There have been volumes written about why comedians are lonely, depressed, rejected, hostile within themselves. They say you must be suffering. I don't adhere to that philosophy."

Comedy writers were often more morose, miserable and angry than the comedians for whom they wrote. Philip Rapp spent decades writing for comedy stars like Eddie Cantor and Danny Kaye. He spoke bitterly in his unpublished memoir: "The dusty corners of comedy are littered with the trash of the stand-up comics who have fallen on their faces. The stand-up comic is a special breed of non-comedian who reads jokes, such as they are, to an audience who rarely pays to see or hear him. He is indigenous to television and nightclubs, borscht circuit hotels and weddings, places to which people would go even if he wasn't there. His earnings may be microscopic or astronomical, depending on his 'drawing power,' which has nothing in common with talent. There are the talented few who are genuinely funny in their approach, but finding them is like looking for grapes in a field of thistles. In the main the stand-up comic belongs to a sub-literate group. The stand-up comics and their one-liners—they might just as well be reading from a joke book."

And for decades they pretty much were. Prior to the 1950s the vocation of stand-up comic was not far removed from being a door-to-door salesman. One learned the basics, memorized some routines

found an agent at 1650 Broadway and called himself a comic. “There were so many bullshit comics back then,” says Jack Carter. “Frauds! Just frauds! When I was coming up there were a million of them and there were lots of clubs for them to work.” A 1946 book called *From Gags to Riches* praised comedians who used lines like “I know there’s an audience out there, I can hear you breathing” and “this an audience or a jury?” It’s amazing anyone earnestly used lines now associated with Fozzie Bear but the Willy Loman approach worked for decades. Eventually men like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Jonathan Winters came along and led a revolution by developing their own material, derived from their actual personalities.

For decades, being funny was not even a prerequisite for a career in comedy. *High Anxiety* scriptwriter Ron Clark remembers a comedy writer named Buddy Arnold. “Buddy Arnold’s big claim to fame was that he was Milton Berle’s writer, but he was more like a *researcher*. Arnold was not a funny guy at all. He would remember an old joke and find a way to switch it. There were a lot of those guys. They weren’t funny, but they were good at piecing it together. It is amazing they earned a living.”

For decades most stand-up comics relied on material written by others, seldom writing their own words. New comedians started to question that method for the first time in the 1950s. “If he’s a character who needs writers, he’s not a comedian,” said Lenny Bruce. “He’s an actor—whom I respect as a craftsman.”

It was a new attitude in comedy. By the time Robert Klein entered the business in the mid-1960s the attitude was an accepted one. The William Morris Agency wanted Klein to write for London Lee, a regular on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but Klein was adamantly opposed. “I have no respect for London Lee or guys that use writers. There was no way I would *ever* use writers.” It was a maverick change.

Back then you could categorize the style of comics based on what they smoked. In the 1960s the new comedians like Dick Gregory and Bob Newhart chain-smoked cigarettes and hipsters like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin smoked pot. Established old-school giants wouldn’t go anywhere without burning a giant cigar. Milton Berle, George Burns, Sid Caesar, George Jessel, Ernie Kovacs, Groucho Marx, Red Skelton and Danny Thomas were cigar aficionados long before it became the trademark of an asshole. “It gave you time to think,” said Marx. “You could tell a joke, and if the audience didn’t laugh you could take some puffs on the cigar. Sometimes that would give the audience a chance to think about the joke and give them time to laugh before you went on to the next joke.” Mel Brooks nearly suffocated while working at *Your Show of Shows*. “Carl [Reiner] smoked a cigar, Sid [Caesar] smoked a cigar, [staff writer] Mel Tolkin smoked a cigar. I think [staff writer] Lucille Kallen smoked a cigar! I couldn’t stand it.” Comedian Alan King started smoking cigars because he was told he had to. “Milton Berle chided me, ‘If you’re gonna be a comedian, you gotta smoke cigars.’ So I started smoking cigars in my act [and] didn’t stop until they took out half my jaw.”

Plagiarism, stolen jokes and lifted ideas have been another familiar narrative in the history of stand-up. Jack Benny’s early years were plagued by threats of lawsuits after he plagiarized from better-known vaudeville performers like Phil Baker and Ben Bernie. More recently were the disputes between Denis Leary and Bill Hicks, Dane Cook and Louis C.K. Producer Robert Morton said the program *Mind of Mencia* was canceled because Comedy Central didn’t want to jeopardize its reputation among comedians after Carlos Mencia was accused of widespread joke thievery. It’s a

unresolved issue that goes back to the earliest days of stand-up.

It's common to hear older comedy fans complain that comedians *used* to be funny. In comedy, generational considerations are everything. As time passes, the comedy from another era fails to resonate with the new generation. Key and Peele fans are laughing at something relevant to their era, whereas the sketches of *The Carol Burnett Show* are mostly relevant to those who were weaned on such comedy. George Carlin influenced Louis C.K. and Lenny Bruce influenced George Carlin—yet very few Louis C.K. fans connect to the material of Lenny Bruce. It's not a matter of one being funny and the other not, but a relation to one's time. Veteran comedian Jan Murray said, "Comedy—even an era—as it dies, people bemoan it. 'Oh, these new comics aren't like *those* guys!' But it's wrong because every generation breeds its own generation that talks to that generation." Shecky Green agrees. "People say to me, 'You guys were better in the old days.' Fuck the old days!"

Vaudeville comedy now seems out of date and out of touch, incapable of creating reflexive laughter. To our modern sensibility the jokes are little more than an intangible abstraction. Epes Sargeant, a veteran critic who died in 1938, predicted that vaudeville comedy was not going to age well: "It must be remembered that old vaudeville was more a matter of style than material. It was not so much *what* they said and did—as *how* they said and did it. The compiler can give the words. He cannot add the saving grace of personality." Viewed through a contemporary prism, vaudeville comedy can be rather painful, but this doesn't mean it wasn't legitimately funny in its day.

And yet the actual experience of the comedian remains similar to that of the vaudeville comic, transcending the generations. Then as now, countless stand-up schleppers toiled in the trenches, learned their craft, bombed before hostile audiences and killed in front of anonymous drunks. The struggle of the funny performer has remained a symbiosis of drive, jealousy, heartbreak and triumph—existing then as it exists now. Perhaps the only other constant is comedy's unfailing popularity. Phyllis Diller once said, "There will never be enough comedy. Comedy is at a premium always."

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The show business trade paper *Variety* was the most important source for showbiz news for nearly a hundred years. Likewise it was the most important source for this book. In many instances its reviews and editorials—which were published six days a week—are the only surviving accounts of many comedians, radio performers and television shows. For this reason *Variety* is cited in these pages frequently.

More than two hundred interviews were conducted for *The Comedians*. Where a quote is derived from an original interview, it is indicated with the present tense “says.” Where a quote is derived from a preexisting source, it is indicated with the past tense “said.” Some quotes have been condensed for length.

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CHAPTER ONE

Vaudeville Comedians

At the start of the twentieth century, the United States had close to five thousand vaudeville theaters. There were small houses with less than five hundred seats, medium theaters seating a thousand and large palaces that accommodated anywhere from fifteen hundred to five thousand people. The result was an immense working-class circuit, an underbelly where future stars learned their craft.

The theaters were owned and operated by a small handful of moguls, greedy men of massive wealth with a pathological need for profit. Benjamin Franklin Keith was one of them. The father of vaudeville's largest circuit, Keith got his start in the 1880s selling tickets to exhibitions of "prematurely born Negro babies." Other money-hungry weirdos copied the idea and the industry hailed Keith as the groundbreaking innovator of the "incubator baby shows."

The Keith circuit controlled the majority of vaudeville theaters west and south of Chicago. "It is a very rich corporation," said a 1905 profile. "Its Chicago offices resemble those of a New York financial institution." And it was every bit as ruthless. Corners were cut to maximize profit: The heat was turned off, the dressing rooms were unkempt, and the comedians' pay was low. Travel tickets, when covered at all, were the cheapest possible. The front of a major vaudeville house might look ornate and dazzling, but behind the curtain it was a parade of literal rats and figurative rodents.

At the turn of the century parishioners attacked vaudeville as a sinful venture. Organized boycotts adversely affected ticket sales. Keith's wife was deeply religious and prodded her husband to follow church directives. Comedian Fred Allen said, "Mrs. Keith instigated the chaste policy, for she would tolerate no profanity, no suggestive allusions, double-entendres or off-color monkey business." Keith realized it would be wise business if he could get into the good graces of the church; receiving its endorsement while the competition suffered a boycott would be a great advantage. Keith aligned himself with religious types and entered a financial partnership with the church. Soon it was bankrolling Keith's larger shows and had made him the most dominant vaudeville force in the Midwest.

Edward Franklin Albee was another mogul and an early partner of Keith's. Together they conspired to crush all competition. They triumphed through intimidation. If it was an independent theater they wanted to take over, they publicly smeared it as a merchant of sin. Its reputation tarnished, they swooped in and "saved" their acquisition with a clean Keith-Albee bill.

They could dish it, but they couldn't take it. If anyone criticized Keith-Albee, there was trouble. *Variety* was the show business paper of record, and when it dared publish objective criticism of Keith-Albee shows, Albee banned *Variety* from his property. Any performer caught reading it was immediately fired from the circuit.

"Edward F. Albee became an almost dictatorial figure in American vaudeville," wrote vaudeville scholar Charles W. Stein. "Our appraisal of him lies midway between unmitigated ogre and enlightened despot. He gobbled up one chain of theaters after another, built huge new ones and succeeded in merging Keith-Albee with the Orpheum circuit."

The Orpheum circuit had been Keith-Albee's largest competitor, with theaters in Calgary

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