

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: STAND-UP COMEDY, REBELLION, AND JEWISH
IDENTITY IN EARLY POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Master of Arts
in the Department of History,
Indiana University

January 2010

Accepted by the Faculty of Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Acknowledgements

I am forever indebted to my thesis chairperson, Annie Gilbert Coleman, for her support, guidance, and foresight to make this thesis possible. I also extend my many thanks to Jason M. Kelly and Monroe H. Little for helping me hone in on my specific arguments in this writing. I am grateful for all the love and support from my friends and family that suffered through my many verbal digressions which made comedy much less funny for them. I must also give thanks to all the rebellious comedians I have idolized over the years including George Carlin, whose career indirectly influenced this thesis, and whose HBO comedy specials engendered in me a love of stand-up comedy and warped my young impressionable mind during the 1980s. Finally, thank you to my beautiful wife and personal editor, Amanda, whose love and support I cherish on a daily basis.

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Introduction

Just after midnight on December 6, 1962 comedian Lenny Bruce took the stage at a popular nightspot called the Gate of Horn in Chicago. In the two previous months Bruce had been arrested three times: once for drug possession and twice for obscenity while performing at the Troubadour in Los Angeles. He wore a raincoat and rumpled pajamas on stage that night (just in case he was arrested again). As he started a comedic routine about marijuana two plainclothes policemen in the audience stood up, announced the show was over, placed Bruce under arrest, and began checking the audience members IDs for underage patrons. Up and coming comedian and acquaintance of Bruce, George Carlin, sat in the audience that night drinking beers with a friend from the folk group the Terriers. When the policemen asked Carlin for his ID he refused to grant them their request. The cops quickly rushed him out the door and threw Carlin into a waiting paddy wagon where Bruce, the club's owner, and a few audience members were waiting. Shocked, Bruce asked the young comedian, "What are you doing here?" Carlin replied, "I told the cops I didn't believe in ID," and Bruce simply called him a "Shmuck."¹

This famous story highlights Bruce's comedic rebelliousness. Images and stories of Bruce being arrested and arguing with trial lawyers and judges became legendary, but before he began specifically fighting censorship in the early 1960s Bruce and a small group of talented comics known as the "sick" comedians started revolutionizing comedy a decade earlier.

¹ Sonny Fox and George Carlin. *Stand Up Sit Down Episode 25: George Carlin Part I*, 43 min., 34 sec.; *Stand Up Sit Down: Comedy Interview*, MP3, <http://podcast.com/show/96449/> (accessed May 30, 2009); Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

Before the “sick” comedians arrived onto the comedy landscape political and culturally based humor was considered taboo, but the 1950s witnessed a dramatic transformation to the art of stand-up comedy. The young comedians, including Bruce and Mort Sahl, became critical of American Cold War policies and the McCarthyistic culture that loomed over the nation’s society. The new stand-up comics tapped into a growing subculture of beatniks and the younger generation at large that rebelled against the conservative ideals that dominated the early post-war decade by performing politically and socially laced commentary on stage in venues that these groups frequented.

The two comedians that best represent this comedic era are Jewish comics Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Their comedy was more politically oriented than the other “sick” comics, and they started an entertainment revolution with their new style. They became legendary by challenging the status quo during a historically conservative time, and inspired numerous comics to take the stage and question basic Cold War assumptions about race, gender, and communism.

In the process both comedians also personified a white masculine Jewish identity during a time that Jewishness was highly contested. After World War II a debate ensued whether or not the Jewish community still had an identity within American culture. Some scholars and rabbis argued that since fewer Jews actually practiced their faith that the Jewish people had assimilated into American society. Though this is a strong argument, the issue is not so simple. It is true that Jews started incorporating American cultural norms into their daily lives and fewer people participated in Jewish religious activities, but most Jews still considered themselves culturally Jewish. One way they

demonstrated this was with humor, a trait that is so intertwined with their culture that in 1978 *Time* magazine noted “Although Jews constitute only 3% of the U.S. population, 80% of the nation’s professional comedians are Jewish.”² This thesis will examine how Sahl and Bruce used humor to voice the growing discontent of America’s youth about various political and cultural post-war issues while also becoming Jewish commentators of white society through the development and refinement of stand-up comedy in the 1950s.

Chapter one discusses the differences between the vaudeville inspired comedic routines and the new satiric style of comedy that emerged during the 1950s. The new style emulated beat and jazz culture and focused on serious political and social topics that had never been discussed on stage prior to Sahl and Bruce’s meteoric rise within the entertainment industry. Chapter two analyzes the environment of comedy clubs and argues that clubs’ settings created an atmosphere that allowed the new comedians to connect with their young audiences and discuss socially and culturally sensitive issues on stage. Chapter three dissects and examines the stage personas and jokes that Sahl and Bruce created, and how their appearance and humor mirrored the image and ideologies of the younger 1950s generation. Chapter four focuses on Sahl and Bruce’s Jewish backgrounds, and how their comedy and personal lives allowed them to use the stage as a forum to speak publicly as critics of 1950s white culture.

Sahl and Bruce used humor to criticize American policies and gain acceptance with a large American audience while also retaining an ethnic identity. In the process they influenced future generations of comedians who also retain their cultural Jewishness

² “Analyzing Jewish Comics,” *Time*, 2 October 1978, 76.

without subscribing to the Jewish religion. One such comedian is Marc Maron. He joked on his 2006 album *Tickets Still Available* that “I don’t have a functioning God I call my own. I’m a Jew, you know? I’m not a Jewy Jew. I’ve got the icon on my spiritual desktop. Little Star of David . . . I don’t click on it much.”³ Sahl and Bruce made sure the Star of David remained on Maron’s desktop, gave him permission not to click, and allowed him to make such an admission on stage. They helped retain Jewish ethnicity almost sixty years earlier when they stepped up on stage in small smoke-filled nightclubs and began a comedic revolution that kept Americans laughing about Cold War politics during the tension-filled McCarthy era.

³ Marc Maron, *Tickets Still Available*, Standup Records 021, 2006, CD.

Chapter One: The Sickniks

They said that he was sick 'cause he didn't play by the rules. He just showed the wise men of his day to be nothing more than fools. — Bob Dylan¹

The cover of the August 15, 1960 issue of *Time* magazine featured a new trend in American humor. Stand-up comedian Mort Sahl graced the front page as “the best of the New Comedians.” With piercing eyes, a smug snarl, and a raised eyebrow, Sahl’s face depicted his “darkly critical” mood. The cover story called Sahl “young, irreverent and trenchant,” and “a volatile mixture of show business and politics.” The comedian routinely scoured newspapers and magazines for fresh commentary about political, social, and cultural trends for his ever-evolving comedic routines. Sahl’s material focused on a large spectrum of topics including the Korean War, the Cold War, President Dwight Eisenhower’s political record, the 1960 presidential election, folk music, and the popularity of high fidelity sound systems. *Time* called him the “freshest comedian around,” but noted Sahl’s audience “is still narrow and his appeal is anything but universal.” Nevertheless, the publication acknowledged he “is a permanent and popular attraction” in nightclubs including San Francisco’s hungry i, Chicago’s Mister Kelly’s, and Manhattan’s Basin Street East.²

Sahl’s rise to fame was a topic many local and national media outlets commented about. By November 1961, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted Sahl’s popularity had grown exponentially since the start of his career in 1953. The newspaper claimed that the American public could not pick up a copy of publications such as the *New Yorker* and the

¹ Bob Dylan, “Lenny Bruce,” *Shot of Love*, Columbia CK 37496, 1981, CD.

² “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

Manchets Guardian “without seeing him quoted as casually as any world figure.”³ The American media took Sahl’s humor seriously. *Time* claimed Sahl possessed “a seemingly sincere passion to change the world.”⁴ *Playboy* called the comedian a “comical critic of current events,” and the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times* conducted and published numerous interviews and articles about his style of comedy and outlook on post-war American society.⁵

Their main theme was Sahl’s deliberate rejection of the time-tested formula that stand-up comedians relied upon prior to Sahl’s debut at the hungry i in 1953.⁶ Without fail the press repeatedly commented on Sahl’s “offbeat and imaginative style.”⁷ The *New York Times* claimed “Sahl differs from the traditional run-of-mouth comedians,” and the *San Francisco Chronicle* said, “None of the conventional craft armamentarium is in evidence.”⁸ *Playboy* heralded Sahl as a “strange sort of comic” who’s “routines are

³ Ralph J. Gleason, “A Bristling Mort Sahl Delights Berkeley Audience,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 November 1960, 20; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁴ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁵ Rolf Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy: The Egghead Humor of Mort Sahl,” *Playboy*, June 1957; Jim Walls, “Out in Left Field: Highbrow Comic Mort Sahl has a Busy Present and Bright Future,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 27, 1955, 6; Louis Gottlieb, “It Takes a Heap of Information to Mint a Mort Sahl Funny,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 1, 1959, 27; “Sahl’s Path to Fame---A Pulpit in the Cellars,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 21, 1961, 32; Ralph J. Gleason, “A Bristling Mort Sahl Delights Berkeley Audience,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 13, 1960, 20; Herbert Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32; Howard Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1961, 11.

⁶ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32; Gottlieb, “It Takes a Heap of Information to Mint a Mort Sahl Funny,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 1, 1959, 27.

anything but routine,” and *Time* noted Sahl and the other “New Comedians” are “Far removed from the old standup joke-book comedians.”⁹

What did these highly respected publications imply when discussing the differences between Sahl’s humor and the “older, machine tooled” comedians?¹⁰

According to the 1960 *Time* cover story, older comedians, like Bob Hope, relied on “safe topical joke[s]” that did not criticize political viewpoints of politicians. *Time* noted that this left political satire “caught between social protest and safe, sponsor-tested lampoons.”¹¹ On the contrary, according to *Time*, Sahl made “political satire . . . come alive again” because he abandoned the old comedic styles set forth before the 1950s and melded politics and socially aware content with comedy.¹²

Prior to 1945 the use of politically laced humor was considered career suicide for a stand-up comedian. Before World War II they shied away from blatantly commenting on such topics as sex, drugs, and politics, but the war and the build up of the Cold War created an unnerving sense of uncertainty throughout American society during the post-war years. Sahl, like so many other comedians, is Jewish, and according to historian Elliott Oring “Jews are regarded as intimate with humor in its broadest range of manifestations.”¹³ He and other Jews undoubtedly felt unsettled by a worldwide anti-Semitic fervor with the uncovering of the atrocities performed during the Holocaust, the Middle East’s negative response to the creation of the Israeli State, and tension caused by

⁹ Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy: The Egghead Humor of Mort Sahl,” *Playboy*, June 1957; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹⁰ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Elliott Oring, Joseph Boskin, ed., “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” *The Humor Prism in 20th-Century America* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997), 134.

the Suez Canal crisis. Sahl and his contemporaries broke new comedic ground by adhering to a new style of comedy that questioned Cold War political policy and social norms. They tested, pushed, and changed the comedic formulas made popular by the “older comedians” who worked tirelessly on the Catskills circuit; a resort area that possessed a deep Jewish tradition and was highly influential to comedy during the early twentieth-century.

The Catskills

During the early years of post-war America, the comedy portrayed on radio and television relied upon entertainment acts made popular by lounges in big cities such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Miami, and resort destinations in the Adirondacks of upper New York State, the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, and numerous New England lakeside vacation spots. Although many entertainers performed at these entertainment venues and vacation havens, “no other area has been as vital and influential” to the field of entertainment like the Catskills. The scenic mountainous region of New York contained a multitude of hotels and family resorts. In fact, entertainment writer Gerald Nachman joked that the popular Sunday night variety television show hosted by Ed Sullivan practically morphed into “a wing of the Catskills hotels.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, (New York: Pantheon Books), 4, 22-29; Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, from the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989) 3-11; Gerald Nachman, “Gerald Nachman Interview,” *San Francisco Comedy Blog* <http://www.sfstandup.com/blog/2007/03/27/gerald-nachman-interview/> (accessed April 9, 2008); Stan Steiner, “Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910-1926: Theaters, Management, and the Orpheum” *The Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (February 1992): 103-13.

These establishments, nestled among majestic scenery, emerged as a popular destination away from the city for their upper-middle class and elite clientele. This region also became synonymous with Jewish-Americans. According to historian Stefan Kanfer, the Jews of New York earned a livelihood and vacationed in the Catskill Mountains for two centuries. Their influence in the region became so significant that the area was known as the Borscht Belt.¹⁵ Catskill destinations had a long history, starting in the early 1800s, and by 1840 the mountainous region started developing fame as a resort area. According to historians Abraham D. Lavender and Clarence B. Steinberg, the early resort destinations mainly served vacationers of Christian decent from New York City. Although a small percentage of Jews lived in the mountainous region since the early 1700s, large numbers of Jewish immigrants did not settle in the area until the 1880s.¹⁶ The influx of Jews brought new farmers, small-businessmen, and entrepreneurs to the region, but the Catskill resorts did not initially accommodate people of Jewish decent. Only “New York’s Christian (primarily Protestant) semiaristocracy” partook in the limited entertainment and amenities offered by the resorts such as hunting, fishing, and “lawn parties.” Soon after immigrant Jews began populating the area and started building businesses and boarding houses.¹⁷

By the 1920s, Jewish entrepreneurs began purchasing the Catskill resorts. Meanwhile in New York City, Jewish “ghetto workers” started receiving larger weekly paychecks, and could afford vacationing in the Catskill Mountains. In response, the

¹⁵ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 3, 6.

¹⁶ Abraham D. Lavender and Clarence B. Steinberg, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills: A Centruy of Survival* (Gainsville FL: Florida UP, 1995), 28-29; Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 12-48.

¹⁷ Lavender, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills*, 28-31, 50-1; Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 89-113.

hotels commenced servicing gentiles and Jewish immigrants that wanted a family vacation away from the urban environment of New York City. The new owners still provided the same hunting and fishing options as their Christian predecessors, but they started incorporating Jewish culture and utilizing local dairy, produce, and game from resident Jewish farmers. Soon after resort advertisements replaced the phrase “No Hebrews Accommodated” with “Kosher Cuisine Featured.”¹⁸

The new resort owners also expanded on the types of entertainment they provided. The 1920s ushered in “themed” nights for the Catskill hotels. For example, Monday became campfire night, Tuesday was costume or dress-up night, guests played games on Wednesday night, and Thursday was nightclub night.¹⁹ The mostly Jewish group of comedic performers employed by the resorts provided entertainment on Thursday nights. Entertainers such as Joey Bishop, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Henny Youngman, Alan King, Shecky Greene, Jerry Lewis, Tony Curtis, Red Buttons, Moss Hart, George Burns, Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Harry Richman, and Danny Kaye all stood on the Catskill stages, and the routines they relied upon became well-known by Catskill patrons. Many performers also borrowed routines from the popular vaudeville circuit.²⁰

By the time the Catskill resorts started providing the new entertainment options during the 1920s, vaudeville had already created a foothold in American entertainment. Historian Albert F. McLean Jr. noted that vaudeville “had reached its full maturity” by 1915. Vaudeville’s popularity caused an increase in the number and size of theaters in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lavender, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills*, 28-31; Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 100-02.

²⁰ Henny Youngman and Neal Karlen, *Take My Life Please!* (New York: William Marrow and Comp, 1991) 112; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 6; Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 6, 102.

large cities while also “spread[ing] its circuits throughout the land . . . to all but the more removed rural areas.” As a result, Vaudeville, also known as variety theater, became a “significant social institution” in the United States.²¹ Acts within the variety theater genre ranged from short concerts by the theater orchestra to wild animal circuses. Entertainers also acted out plays, performed comedy sketches, and played solo musical numbers.²² Vaudeville theater became so trendy that one Catskill resort owner hired a stenographer to attend popular shows in the surrounding area to transcribe jokes and song lyrics for Catskill entertainers to use.²³

Once the nightclub night began at the Catskill resorts, the popularity of the new all-purpose vaudeville-inspired entertainers quickly grew. Guests enjoyed watching the *Tumblers* (a Yiddish word for “the manic” or “noise”) and soon they became permanent fixtures at the resorts.²⁴ The *Tumblers*, which also encompassed stand-up comedians, relied on vaudeville’s formula of providing safe non-topical jokes and performing an ever evolving array of entertainment options. For example, Catskill comics recited one-line jokes and catchphrases in rapid-fire succession. In his autobiography, comedian Bob Hope wrote “My method . . . was to deliver a series of one-liners, joke, joke, joke . . . I would zing a joke and then start on the next line and wait for the audience to catch up.”²⁵

²¹ Albert F. McLean Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 1-2; Steiner, “Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910-1926: Theaters, Management, and the Orpheum” *The Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (February 1992), 103.

²² Steiner, “Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910-1926: Theaters, Management, and the Orpheum” *The Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (February 1992), 107.

²³ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 102.

²⁴ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 6; Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 108.

²⁵ Bob Hope and Melville Shavelson, *Don’t Shoot, It’s Only Me* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Son, 1990), 25.

In the early stages of Alan King's career, he spat out one-liners in Catskill lounges until he altered his act and "made it more personal" years later.²⁶ Henny Youngman, who gained notoriety with the catch phrase "take my wife, please," noted the *Tummler's* job was "to make a quick hit with a funny line or gag, then get out of there quickly." He believed the comedic subject needed changing at a rapid pace or people would grow tired with an entertainer's act.²⁷

Some of the one-liners focused on insults. Comedians continually drew laughter with jokes insulting the in-laws, a wife or even members of the audience.²⁸ Insults became so prominent that entertainers often recruited guests, and taught them a few insults to hurl toward the *Tummler* as he performed on stage.²⁹ Hope believed the audience "loved to see the big guy [the comedian] getting his dignity punctured" with one-liners.³⁰

These comedians also emphasized ethnic humor. According to historian Lawrence E. Mintz, the nucleus of humor based on ethnicity is the "construction of caricatures based on familiar ethnic stereotypes and linguistic humor."³¹ Comic routines employed various comedic structures such as puns, malapropisms, double entendres, and stereotypical foreign accents to generate laughs. For example, comedians acted in a state

²⁶ Alan King and Chris Chase, *Name-Dropping: The Life and Lies of Alan King* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 59.

²⁷ Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 21, 110.

²⁸ Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 140-41, 206-07; King, *Name-Dropping*, 26-28, 59; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 23.

²⁹ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 102.

³⁰ Bob Hope, "A Funny Thing About Comedy....," *New York Times*, 24 October 1976, 103.

³¹ Lawrence E. Mintz, "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque," *The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 21, no. 4 (winter 1996): 20.

of drunkenness when pretending to be Irish, or they utilized malapropism with Italian characters. With a thick Italian accent, the comedian would confuse words like pallbearer with polar bear.³²

The Jewish comedian's ethnic status in the United States allowed them to safely perform ethnically based humor on stage. According to historian Arthur Asa Berger, "Dialect involves speaking a language . . . with a strong accent" and, "Because Jews are so marginal in America . . . their humor has tended to use certain techniques that are traditionally employed by the marginal."³³ He also noted that because of widespread anti-Semitism in the United States during the first half of the twentieth-century, "Jewish humor used those techniques that enabled them to make their points but not be held accountable for their aggression" toward society's ills.³⁴ Essentially, being Jewish gave comedians the freedom to use ethnic stereotypes and criticize society as a whole during the 1920s and 1930s.

Besides ethnic stereotypes, comedians also relied on double entendres when discussing such taboo topics as religion, money, or sex.³⁵ These comedic techniques insured a hint of raciness while keeping the performance a family-friendly show. This self-imposed censorship kept the comedian from overstepping certain boundaries while discussing taboo topics. In 1976, decades after the peak of vaudeville's popularity, Hope complained that the acceptable comedic subject matter had changed. He wrote, "Tell a black joke and you're suddenly a racist. But sex jokes, which used to be out, are now in."

³² *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

³³ Arthur Asa Berger, *Jewish Jesters: A Study in American Popular Comedy* (Cresskill NJ, Hampton Press, 2001), 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 106.

Hope noted that “it’s very difficult to find a really good sex joke because the closer you get to the subject, the tougher it is not to be raunchy.”³⁶ Raunchiness was a description many vaudevillian comedians tried to avoid.

Though comedians routinely incorporated insults and ethnic stereotypes on stage, they believed the comedic material borrowed from vaudeville should focus on “inoffensive topical humor.”³⁷ Hope agreed with this comedy philosophy. He thought entertainers should “keep them [jokes] topical and . . . try not to offend,” and advocated that “censorship should be self-imposed.”³⁸ Comedian George Carlin’s career is an excellent example of comedic censorship. Carlin originally worked in big-city lounges during the 1960s, which mirrored the Catskill stages. He wore a suit and tie, and performed with a “mainstream attitude” while working in these places. Offstage Carlin became involved with the counterculture movement, and realized many of his friends spoke “out of their heart . . . what they saw wrong with the country.” Carlin remarked that he performed “silly things for audiences of older people who were the parents of my friends” during the early part of his career and he later “realized what assholes they were.”³⁹

Besides stereotypical ethnic humor and masking taboo subjects with double entendre phrasing, comedians performing in the Borscht Belt made their material funny by relying on repetition and timing. According to Youngman, “just memorizing some new gags was the simplest part of the job.” He claimed the hardest part about his

³⁶ Hope, “A Funny Thing About Comedy...,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1976, 103.

³⁷ Kanfer, *A Summer World*, 86.

³⁸ Hope, “A Funny Thing About Comedy...,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1976, 103.

³⁹ George Carlin, *Comic Insights: The Art of Standup Comedy*, ed. Franklyn Ajaye (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 2002), 82-83.

performance was “working out timing, topicality, and rapport with the guests.”⁴⁰ Hope agreed with Youngman. In a 1976 *New York Times* editorial Hope declared “If I have a gift, it lies in the timing.” He believed “a combination of authority and timing” created a great comedian because confidently saying the right material at an opportune moment projected a strong stage presence.⁴¹

Though the comedians possessed an extensive catalogue of jokes, Gerald Nachman claims they “were only one piece of the craft.”⁴² Catskill comedians mimicked the vaudevillian formula by providing numerous entertainment options, and became famous for entertaining the audience with special talents. Besides telling jokes, Jack Benny and Youngman relied on musical talent. They both played the violin.⁴³ According to Milton Berle, George Burns never told jokes. He only “stands, talks, and sings a few bars,” but the “Audiences howl when he opens his mouth.”⁴⁴ Comedian Shecky Greene did tell jokes, but if the audience did not respond, then he had songs or impressions he used to keep the audiences attention.⁴⁵ At other times these entertainers performed physical comedy. Journalist David Halberstam wrote, “[Milton] Berle was the quintessential vaudeville slapstick comic . . . It [his act] depended heavily on sight gags . . . He would do anything for a laugh—don a wig, a dress, or false teeth, fall on his face or take a pie in it.”⁴⁶ Besides Berle, other comedians performed physical comedy too. Alan

⁴⁰ Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 118.

⁴¹ Hope, “A Funny Thing About Comedy...,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1976, 103.

⁴² Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 143-45.

⁴⁴ Milton Berle, *B.S. I Love You: Sixty Funny Years with the Famous and the Infamous* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 85-86.

⁴⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 27.

⁴⁶ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 185-86.

King said he began his career as a “burlesque”—a very physical form of comedy—who “ran around and did crazy things.”⁴⁷ These were multi-faceted entertainers and craftsmen of their trade. They did anything they deemed inoffensive for a laugh including clowning with the audience, singing, dancing, doing impressions, wearing funny outfits, or even rough pratfalls.

Prior to World War II the Catskill or vaudeville circuit was a cut-throat business. In his autobiography, Alan King commented that comedians needed to be prepared for any type of performance including vaudeville, burlesque, musical, or even operatic shows.⁴⁸ According to Youngman, he quickly learned “there are only so many jobs to go around.” Before nightclubs became popular throughout the country, there “was nowhere to go” to make a living except the Catskills.⁴⁹ Many comedians struggled while they “scratched their way up” from “tank-town dives” to the Catskill resorts.⁵⁰

The comedians that graced the Catskill stages were career showmen. They competed on a nightly basis with chorus girls, singers, and dance bands. They needed “to make a racket, verbal and visual” to grab the audience’s attention. With so much pressure, comedians possessed little time to use humor as social commentary.⁵¹ These comedians “had no interest in changing society” because survival was their goal.⁵² In the interest of employment, comedians used dependable and fast vaudeville inspired insults, stereotypes, and double entendres. Their humor came from repetition and timing rather

⁴⁷ King, *Name-Dropping*, 26-28, 59.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹ Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 14, 118.

⁵⁰ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 22.

⁵¹ King, *Name-Dropping*, 26-8; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 23.

⁵² Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 22-23.

than astute observations about society and culture. The jokes never broadened beyond a minor risqué quip about sex or politics, but by the 1950s the comedic tide shifted toward a more socially conscious form of humor.

The Emergence of a New Comedian

Mort Sahl created a different brand of comedy that, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “is largely political, and his aim—one generally supposed to be fatal to a popular entertainer—is to make his audience think.”⁵³ Gerald Nachman observed that “Teenagers . . . in the early fifties were baffled and bored by the comedians their parents doted on . . . they were consummate entertainers, but they had little to say about the emerging world.”⁵⁴ An insightful interview with Sahl, published by the *New York Times* in 1959, acknowledged the differences between him and the veteran Catskill entertainers. Interviewer Herbert Mitgang first noted that Sahl wrote his own material, unlike prior entertainers who borrowed and stole from each other.⁵⁵ According to the Sahl, when he first began his stand-up career he worked tirelessly trying to hone his craft. He spent much of the day either on stage at the hungry i or across the street with a notebook and newspapers writing new material.⁵⁶ Mitgang also commented on Sahl’s keen improvisational skills. The reporter claimed “although the material has been written,” Sahl “free associates—leaping from subject to subject . . . as his mood, the audience and

⁵³ “Sahl’s Path to Fame---A Pulpit in the Cellars,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 July 1961, 32.

⁵⁴ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 4.

⁵⁵ Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32; Hope, *Don’t Shoot, It’s Only Me*, 25; John Baxter, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1998), 52; King, *Name-Dropping*, 61; Youngman, *Take My Life Please!*, 14-15, 116-17; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 22-23.

⁵⁶ Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 14.

the daily news affect his thinking.” Finally, Mitgang acknowledged Sahl did not draw laughter by relying on singing, dancing, dressing in “funny hats,” and performing physical comedy. “His act is,” Mitgang said, “in a word, cerebral.”⁵⁷

Thirteen months prior to Sahl gracing the cover of *Time*, the same publication printed a less-than-positive depiction of him and other comedians performing this new genre of comedy in an article entitled “Nightclubs: The Sickniks.” The unnamed author described this form of humor as “partly social criticism liberally laced with cyanide, partly . . . jolly ghoulishness, and partly a personal and highly disturbing hostility toward all the world.” *Time* acknowledged that some audiences were not ready for this new brand of humor. The author’s obvious dislike for these comedians is noticeable throughout the article as the writer peppers the piece with a psychoanalytical diagnosis of the comedians, claiming the “sick comedians [are] a symptom of the 20th century’s own sickness.” The writer also made a clear-cut comparison between the emerging new comedians and the older Catskill veterans. The author noted, “The novelty and jolt of the sickniks is that their gags (“I hit on of those things in the street—what do you call it, a kid?”) come so close to real horror and brutality that audiences wince even as they laugh.” According to the writer, the newer comedians did not possess any tact. The author claimed “No one’s flesh crawled when Jack Benny carried on a gag about a bear” locked in a cellar “that had eaten the gasman when he came to read a meter.”⁵⁸

The reporter’s worrisome article made clear the troubling fact that “the virus [sicknik humor] has spread” from Sahl to other emerging comedians. The *Time* piece named Sahl “the original sicknik,” and labeled a plethora of other performers including

⁵⁷ Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32.

⁵⁸ “Nightclubs: The Sickniks,” *Time*, 13 July 1959, 42-43.

Shelley Berman, Lenny Bruce, Tom Lehrer, Don Adams, Jonathan Winters, and the comedic duo of Elaine May and Mike Nichols as “sick comedians” too.⁵⁹ Though the article lumped these comedians into one genre, these comics performed in a variety of ways, and incorporated different content into their routines. For example, Nichols and May improvised sketches based on everyday situations such as two teenagers fornicating in a car or a disc jockey gone berserk. Nichols acknowledged that their routines were satire, but noted, “It isn’t political . . . What we do is satire of behavior.” He stated the sketches that received the biggest laughs were “basically true.”⁶⁰ The newer comedians, like Nichols and May, focused on observations and stories about real life situations instead of recycled jokes and stereotypes.

Essentially, Shelly Berman’s act mirrored Nichols and May, but the routines incorporated a telephone prop that allowed “Shelly’s bits of monkey business [to] consist of harried, one-way conversations.”⁶¹ Jonathan Winters also satirized everyday life situations, but he created “very noisy stories” by impersonating his characters, such as an “old maid school teacher” or “an excitable Chinese cook” with one of his “1000 voices.”⁶² According to comedian Irwin “Professor” Corey, “The future seems so precarious, people are willing to abandon themselves to chaos. The new comics reflect this.”⁶³ The 1960 *Time* cover article conceded that this “new school of comedians that [have] grown up with [Sahl]” were “less political but, like Sahl, they all stay close to an

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Jack Keating, “The Changing Face of Comedy,” *Nugget*, April 1959, 15-19, 32, 43, 70.

⁶¹ “Berman on the Telephone,” *Playboy*, July 1958.

⁶² John Rublowsky, “Jonathan Winters: TV’s Near-Do-Well,” *Scene*, June 1962, 20-21, 65-66.

⁶³ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

essentially offbeat and imaginative style.”⁶⁴ Their sickness resided in the fact that no subject including “motherhood, childhood, adulthood, [and] sainthood” were taboo, and their “sicknik mood and method range[d] all the way from the wistful social desperation . . . to the usually vicious barrage.”⁶⁵

In this group of “sickniks,” only one other stand-up comedian received such highly publicized notoriety as Sahl. The 1959 *Time* article called Lenny Bruce “the most successful of the newer sickniks,” but repeatedly admonished him as a hack. The author noted that Bruce “keeps thinking that he is a comedian but succeeds only in spouting his miseries.”⁶⁶ Bruce’s material constantly attacked taboo subjects. A 1959 *Playboy* article observed, “In a single performance, comedian Lenny Bruce may find humor in such sacred and profane subjects as religion, homosexuality, funeral homes, race relations, dope addiction and matricide.”⁶⁷ The *Time* writer conceded that audiences laughed at Bruce’s material, but claimed “much of the time he merely shouts angrily and tastelessly at the way of the world.”⁶⁸ According to *Playboy* columnist Larry Siegel, “misplaced public emotionalism is a favorite Bruce target.” Siegel also claimed his performances preached tolerance.⁶⁹ Bruce attacked political, social, and cultural hypocrisies, and his style varied greatly from the Catskill performer’s reliance on repetition, timing, ethnic

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Nightclubs: The Sickniks,” *Time*, 13 July 1959, 42-43.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Larry Siegel, “Rebel with a Caustic Cause,” *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78.

⁶⁸ “Nightclubs: The Sickniks,” *Time*, 13 July 1959, 42-43.

⁶⁹ Siegel, “Rebel with a Caustic Cause,” *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78.

stereotyping, and self-censorship. By rejecting the Catskill formula, he “seemed to amuse most,” but “outrage . . . many” audiences.⁷⁰

The 1960 *Time* article declared that “the biggest symbol of Mort Sahl’s success” is the fact that “he is the patriarch of a new school of comedians.” Even politicians followed Sahl’s comedic content.⁷¹ He constantly satirized the Eisenhower Administration and John Kennedy’s Presidential nomination. Much of the media considered Sahl to be on the political left because he contributed “a joke bank” to the Kennedy campaign, performed for Harry Truman on his seventy-fifth birthday, and befriended Democrat Adlai Stevenson. Yet he voted for Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election.⁷² *Time* noted that “Sahl is no court jester to the Democrats” and that he “often amuses many Republicans.”⁷³ Sahl used his humor to pinpoint everyone’s follies without showing bias toward one political party, and in some cases, showed the absurdity of the entire political system.

With comedians and highly respected public officials of political parties eyeing Sahl’s comedic performances, why did the 1959 *Time* author feel threatened by Sahl and the emerging new comedians? The staggering disparity between the two *Time* articles and Mitgang’s glowing review of Sahl highlights the constant political, social, and

⁷⁰ “Nightclubs: The Sickniks,” *Time*, 13 July 1959, 42-43.

⁷¹ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁷² Mort Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, MG V-15021; Mort Sahl, *Look Forward in Anger*, Verve, MG V-15004; Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002; Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012; Mort Sahl, *A Way of Life*, Verve, MG V-15006; Sahl, *Heartland*; Robert Alden, “City Salutes Truman a Day Early,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1959, 1; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-99; Blake Green, “Mort Sahl,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 November 1976, 17.

⁷³ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

cultural conflicts that occurred during the 1950s and early 1960s, and the comedian's risky acknowledgment of them.

With the closing of World War II, the "red scare" dictated the United States' foreign and domestic policies. August 1945 ushered in the new era when the United States used the atomic bomb against Japan to abruptly end World War II. The atomic age fueled the growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States as both countries vied for greater world dominance through competing political ideologies. Directly after the war, the United States enjoyed a four-year monopoly with the atomic bomb, but on September 23, 1949, Harry Truman announced that the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic device. Overnight, Americans realized their secure defense against Soviet attack had diminished to terrible uncertainty about the nation's future.⁷⁴

Two years before Truman's announcement the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) started investigating subversive activity in Hollywood. Though many Hollywood entertainers and producers disagreed with the investigation, studio heads feared the public's hostile opinion toward the accused, and did little or nothing to defend many of their employees. The most notable group prosecuted were the "Hollywood Ten." These ten screenwriters refused to answer questions, declared their First Amendment rights had been violated, and insulted HUAC members during the hearings. By the end of the investigation approximately 240 professionals in the entertainment industry were "blacklisted." Many did not regain employment for years.

⁷⁴ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 24-30; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 105-17.

HUAC also cited the “Hollywood Ten” for contempt. They all lost their appeals in 1950, and served prison time ranging between six months and a year.⁷⁵

By the start of the 1950s domestic tension still continued to mount. On February 9, 1950, Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy created a “carnival-like . . . spree of accusations, charges, and threats” during a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia. McCarthy claimed numerous communists worked in the United State’s State Department, and controlled American foreign policy.⁷⁶ Quickly, Americans grew anxious of possible infiltrations into highly classified and influential jobs by communist agents and their sympathizers. For four years McCarthy, his supporters, and some members of the press, accused politicians (both Republican and Democrat), members of the civil service, the Protestant clergy, and the United States Army of communist leanings.⁷⁷ This onslaught of finger pointing became known as “McCarthyism.”

The buildup of allegations of communist subversivness fueled the United State’s uneasiness. Historian James T. Patterson noted that McCarthyism “rode on anti-Communist fears . . . already cresting in early 1950,” but also noted that millions of Americans rejected McCarthyism’s fear-mongering and vision of the world. Senator McCarthy’s antics only lasted for a brief timespan from 1950 to 1954, but by the mid-1950s an estimated few thousand people lost their jobs; a few hundred, including Alger Hiss, were jailed; more than 150 deported; and two, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were executed. Halberstam noted that “McCarthyism crystallized and politicized the anxieties

⁷⁵ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 189-90.

⁷⁶ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 49-52.

⁷⁷ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 49-59; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 196-205.

of a nation living in a dangerous new era.”⁷⁸ McCarthyism straitjacketed American’s foreign and defense policies, and, more importantly, constricted public life and speech during the 1950s.⁷⁹ It was the restrictions on speech during the height of McCarthyism that made Sahl’s debut at the hungry i in 1953 controversial or “sick,” and prompted an employee of the nightclub to note that Sahl said “things that people like me were only comfortable saying in the privacy of our living rooms, and only if we were very sure of our friends and family.”⁸⁰

Yet not everyone in the media dismissed Sahl as sick. His brand of humor drew comparisons to satirist Will Rogers, the “country-boy conscience of the ‘20s and early ‘30s.” The 1960 *Time* cover story noted that Sahl “has relatively few U.S. models to draw on” because, with few exceptions, “political satire has never particularly thrived in the U.S.” The magazine listed writers like Thomas Morton, Charles Farrar Browne, Artemus Ward, and Mark Twain as possible comparisons, but noted Sahl most closely resembled Rogers.⁸¹ Much like Rogers, Sahl’s satirical work blasted American politics, but Sahl’s jabs at the American government were more concise. *Time* even noted that Sahl was “a sort of Will Rogers with fangs.”⁸² Rogers made broad and general quips about the workings of the American government, but Sahl scoured “newspapers and magazines by the long ton” and commented on specific instances like the U2 spy plane crash in Sverdlovsk, Russia, or school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁸³ Sahl used

⁷⁸ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 52, 193-95.

⁷⁹ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 49-59; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 179-80, 201-05.

⁸⁰ Thomas A. Cohen, *hungry i Reunion* (Long Beach, NJ: hungry i Productions, 1980).

⁸¹ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁸² “Comedians: Will Rogers with Fangs,” *Time*, 25 July 1960, 42-43.

⁸³ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

politics as “the trunk line” of his humor, and *Time* noted he “reacts like a pellet of pure sodium dropped in a glass of water” while “Skimming, dipping, darting from headline to picture caption” and giving “some wild variation of the news, and a routine remark at a presidential press conference.”⁸⁴ The *Time* reporter said Rogers could be biting but also called him “lovable” and “jovially rustic,” while Sahl was more “urban and hip.”⁸⁵

Sahl’s “hipness” reflected his involvement with various movements in the 1950s that were critical of Cold War politics. In fact, George Carlin once called Sahl a “hippie.” Carlin explained that he meant a person prior to the typified 1960s hippie when he described it as, “people who were finger poppers and wore cufflinks.”⁸⁶ This “hipness” that *Time* and Carlin spoke about was a logical association made between Sahl, the beat movement, and jazz music. Sahl acknowledged his association with the beats on his 1960 album stating that “I’m still a bohemian.” In reference to his rising popularity he said, “I don’t want anyone to think I sold out. The generation is now in style—the beat generation.”⁸⁷

The beats protested “the blandness, conformity, and lack of serious social and cultural purpose in middle-class life in America.”⁸⁸ During the 1950s middle-class Americans enjoyed a growing affluence they never experienced before. Much of the nation enthusiastically migrated to the suburbs as they started families, purchased

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Sonny Fox and George Carlin. *Stand Up Sit Down Episode 25: George Carlin Part 1*, 43 min., 34 sec.; *Stand Up Sit Down: Comedy Interview*, MP3, <http://podcast.com/show/96449/> (accessed May 30, 2009).

⁸⁷ Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002.

⁸⁸ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307; Anne Waldman, ed. with a forward by Allen Ginsberg, *The Beat Book: Writings from the Beat Generation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), xiii-xxiii.

automobiles and property, and befriended neighbors who eerily resembled themselves. The beats consciously rejected this new middle-class life, and created an alternate lifestyle based on freedom—freedom to randomly migrate throughout the country without a moment’s notice, eschew professional jobs, and think critically about the nation’s McCarthyistic actions. The beatniks, who mostly possessed a white middle-class background, viewed suburbia as a prison, celebrated African-American culture, embraced individuality, sexual liberation, and drug experimentation. They openly discussed spirituality, religion, politics, and multiculturalism, and became the precursor to the counterculture of the 1960s.

The origin of the word “beat” is important because it demonstrates the beatnik’s conscious effort to incorporate racial characteristics into their group’s dynamic makeup. Contemporary history books debate the origin of the word, but they agree the word originated in the African-American community. Jazz musicians and hipsters used it as a slang term meaning “down and out,” or “broke;” a feeling the younger generation had about 1950s society. A Times Square hustler named Herbert Huncke supposedly passed the word onto students at Columbia College; where notable beatniks Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg went to school.⁸⁹

Halberstam noted that the beats “revered those who were different,” and lived outside the system. Their fascination extended to urban black culture. The beats believed African Americans were “freer,” and less burdened by the restraints of straight or middle-class America. They started adopting words such as “dig,” “cool,” “man,” and “split,” and began building a personification of a “white bopster” by emulating African

⁸⁹ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307; Waldman, *The Beat Book*, xiii-xxiii.

American culture. One of the most common links between the beats and African Americans was music. Halberstam claimed an interest in jazz “was almost a passport into Beat society.”⁹⁰

Besides identifying with the beats, Sahl, Bruce, and the other new comedians also implemented elements of urban culture into their performances and personal lives. The *Time* magazine cover article quoted Sahl using “far-out terms such as chick, drag, gasser, cool it, bug, dig, weird-o and all that jazz,” and the *New York Times* noted Bruce peppered his material with “shards of hip talk” as he “liberally sprinkled . . . hipster jargon and pithy Yiddish expressions” into his act.⁹¹

Aside from the urban talk, the new comedians also borrowed an important stylistic characterization from jazz music: improvisation. Jonathan Winters not only improvised with words and foreign accents, but routinely incorporated sounds such as machine gun fire or a powerful diesel engine with his “elastic larynx.”⁹² Nichols and May recorded an album based solely on improvisation. The two comedians sat at a table in a recording studio in Steinway Hall and improvised a forty-five minute conversation laced with comedic eloquence.⁹³ The list of comedians who relied on improvisational skills is endless, but the two most popular comedians of this era, Sahl and Bruce, personified this jazz artistry.

⁹⁰ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307.

⁹¹ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Gilbert Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

⁹² Rublowsky, “Jonathan Winters: TV’s Near-Do-Well,” *Scene*, June 1962, 20-21, 65-66; Jonathan Winters, *Down to Earth*, Verve, MG V-15011; Jonathan Winters, *The Wonderful World of Jonathan Winters*, Verve, MG V-15009.

⁹³ Keating, “The Changing Face of Comedy,” *Nugget*, April 1959, 15-19, 32, 43, 70.

Playboy said Sahl possessed a “lack of method,” relied on “free association,” and noted “he will ramble and digress . . . in a delivery that is rapid and without pause . . . [with] the headlong excitement of the inspired conversationalist whose ideas run ahead of his tongue.”⁹⁴ Instead of rapidly zinging one-liners, Sahl and other comedians improvised in a chatty informal manner making Sahl’s delivery an “impressionistic yackety-yack.”⁹⁵ The use of one-liners had become so ingrained in audience’s expectations that *Playboy* columnist Rolf Malcolm noted “the uninitiated” participants of a Mort Sahl performance may have trouble “following what he is saying.”⁹⁶ Bruce also utilized improvisational techniques. The *New York Times* noted that “Mr. Bruce operated in a spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness fashion a good deal of the time.” In fact, Bruce’s material was so sporadic that the *New York Times* claimed “he is likely to tell you what he’s thinking about telling you before he gets around to telling you anything.”⁹⁷ The use of improv allowed the audience to hear what the comedian truly thought about the present social and political climate. No specific jokes were prepared for a performance, and according to *Time* this created “fresh material for each new audience.”⁹⁸

Though both comedians used their improvisational skills on stage, they emulated two different styles of jazz made popular during the 1950s. During the 1930s and 1940s jazz music became commercially successful as large musical ensembles performed highly composed music for mainly white audiences. After World War II some jazz musicians

⁹⁴ Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy,” *Playboy*, June 1957.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy,” *Playboy*, June 1957.

⁹⁷ Arthur Gelb, “Comic Gives Shocks with Moral,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1960, 44.

⁹⁸ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

started forming smaller ensembles, blending new instrumentation, and emphasizing improvisational techniques that were lost during the dance band or swing era. The first popular postwar style was “cool” or “west coast” jazz. This form of jazz, played mainly by white musicians, relied heavily on European musical traditions, possessed a smooth sound with calm “laidback” tones, and was enjoyed by mainly white audiences.⁹⁹ Sahl’s comedic delivery was much the same. His comedy recordings sound smooth and steady while spoken at a leisurely and consistent tempo. Sahl’s voice is never overbearing or brash, but sullen, and his tonal inflections never vary greatly.¹⁰⁰ On the contrary, Bruce’s delivery mirrors the other popular jazz style of the day, be-bop. Be-bop is fast-paced, loud, and aggressive with discontinuity between melodic structures and musical phrasing played by the musicians.¹⁰¹ The *New York Times* noted that Bruce’s act was “devoid of the running series of staccato jokes that are traditional to the night-club comic.” The article claimed he was “biting” and “sardonic,” and noted “he will trail off in mid-sentence, bob his head up and down, grunt, ‘Yeah’ or ‘Yeah, man,’ and turn his back on the audience.”¹⁰² Bruce’s *The Carnegie Hall Concert* album epitomizes these characteristics. Bruce’s tonal inflections rapidly changed, his content was garish and

⁹⁹ Charles Fox, “Jazz Since 1945,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 86th Sess., (1959-1960): 15-27; Sanford M. Helm, “Jazz: Music History in Miniature,” *Music Educators Journal*, 51, no. 4 (Feb.-Mar., 1965): 53-59, 180.

¹⁰⁰ Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, MG V-15021; Sahl, *Look Forward in Anger*, Verve, MG V-15004; Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002; Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012; Sahl, *A Way of Life*, Verve, MG V-15006.

¹⁰¹ Fox, “Jazz Since 1945,” 15-27.

¹⁰² Gelb, “Comic Gives Shocks with Moral,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1960, 44.

considered vulgar, he spoke at a brisk pace, and his performance was highly improvised.¹⁰³

More than just the media acknowledged the similarities between the comedians and jazz. The jazz industry embraced these comics. Jonathan Winters, Shelly Berman and Mort Sahl released comedy albums with the renowned Verve jazz record label.¹⁰⁴ Lenny Bruce recorded records with the jazz label Fantasy.¹⁰⁵ In later years, comedian Bill Cosby released numerous jazz records on the Verve label, and his character Heathcliff Huxtable repeatedly commented on his love for jazz on his hit 1980s television program *The Cosby Show*.¹⁰⁶ Satirist Woody Allen currently plays the clarinet and tours with a Dixieland jazz band. He also shared the stage and performed his stand-up routine on the same bill as the renowned Bill Evans Trio and Herbie Mann's Afro-Jazz Sextet at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in 1962.¹⁰⁷

Early in his career, Mort Sahl toured college campuses with one of the most popular west coast jazz groups, the Dave Brubeck Quartet. He also befriended pianist

¹⁰³ Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific, CDP7243 8 34020 2 1.

¹⁰⁴ Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, MG V-15021; Sahl, *Look Forward in Anger*, Verve, MG V-15004; Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002; Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012; Sahl, *A Way of Life*, Verve, MG V-15006; Shelley Berman, *Inside Shelley Berman*, Verve, MG V-15003; Winters, *Down to Earth*, Verve, MG V-15011; Winters, *The Wonderful World of Jonathan Winters*, Verve, MG V-15009.

¹⁰⁵ Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 1, Fantasy, FCD-60-023; Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 2, Fantasy, FCD-60-024.

¹⁰⁶ Verve Records, *Bill Cosby*, <http://www.vervemusicgroup.com/artist/default.aspx?aid=2842> (accessed April 28, 2008); Bill Cosby, *The Cosby Show (The Complete Series)*, NBC, 1984-1992.

¹⁰⁷ Woody Allen and his New Orleans Jazz Band, *Wild Man Blues*, RCA Victor; New York Jazz Ensemble, *The Bunk Project*, Music Master Jazz; "Y.M.H.A. Presents 2D Jazz Concert," *New York Times*, 19 March 1962, 37.

Brubeck and his saxophonist Paul Desmond.¹⁰⁸ Lenny Bruce performed comedy on the same bill as legendary saxophonist Ben Webster and pianist Paul Moor at a very popular jazz nightclub in San Francisco called the Jazz Workshop (It was also the setting for his first arrest for lewd conduct).¹⁰⁹ Much like the beats, these comedians embraced African-American culture by incorporating elements of jazz into their own performances.

As the emerging comedians of the 1950s abandoned the Catskill formula by focusing on new subject matter, styles, and delivery, they also changed their stage attire. Numerous publications commented on Sahl's wardrobe. In his autobiography, Sahl remarked that comedians needed a tuxedo in the years prior to 1953, but soon after he started performing at the hungry i owner Enrico Banducci suggested he cast-off the suit and tie. Afterwards, Sahl started wearing a sweater and collared shirt.¹¹⁰ As his popularity grew, nightclubs still required comedians to wear a suit. According to Sahl, the Black Orchard in Chicago insisted he "go out on the sidewalk between shows" when the club booked him in 1954 because the establishment required everyone, including patrons, to dress formally.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, Sahl's wardrobe, along with a rolled-up

¹⁰⁸ Sahl, *Heartland*, 18; "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹⁰⁹ "Cops Seize Lenny Bruce--'Dirty Talk,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 October 1961, 1; "The Law and Lenny Bruce," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 August 1964, 37; Root, Jonathan, "A Crusade On Hypocrisy," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 August 1966; Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002), 47-50.

¹¹⁰ Walls, "Out in Left Field: Highbrow Comic Mort Sahl has a Busy Present and Bright Future," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 27, 1955, 6; "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Malcolm, "A Real Fee-Form Guy," *Playboy*, June 1957; Sahl, *Heartland*, 12-19.

¹¹¹ Sahl, *Heartland*, 18-19.

newspaper that he originally used to staple comedic notes to, became the trademark image of the young comedian.¹¹²

After he started discussing controversial subjects on stage, George Carlin also changed the look of his act by growing his hair long, wearing a beard, taking off his suit, and molding his performance into something that identified himself as part of the counterculture. Sahl and Carlin's appearance symbolized their effort to disassociate with the Catskill comedians. Carlin claimed, at the beginning of his comic rebirth, that he still performed in "gin-joints [Catskill-like lounges]" frequented by Shriners, prostitutes, and salesmen ("which are the same as hookers"), and that the audience perceived him as a "commie, fag, junkie." Later, management at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas fired him for provoking the audience and cursing on stage. According to the comedian, after that incident, he felt liberated.¹¹³

Aside from the hip language and interest in jazz, the new comedians connected with the beat generation through the use of thought provoking ideas and discussions about topics typically considered taboo. This sort of content upset some critics and audiences. According to a *New York Times* interview with Mort Sahl, "some in his audiences are unimpressed by what he has to say and the way he says it." The interviewer, Herbert Mitgang, noted "they want their comedians to make jokes," much like the Catskill comedians, and "not to remind them of their troubles."¹¹⁴ The *Time* cover story noted that Lenny Bruce "whines, uses four-letter words . . . talks about rape

¹¹² Malcolm, "A Real Fee-Form Guy," *Playboy*, June 1957; Sahl, *Heartland*, 13.

¹¹³ George Carlin, *FM & AM*, Atlantic, 92924-2; Carlin, *Comic Insights*, 82-84.

¹¹⁴ Mitgang, "Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl," *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32.

and amputees, and deserves distinction of a sort for delivering the sickest single line on record.”¹¹⁵

Though some journalists labeled their humor “sick,” many in the media repeatedly commented on the new comedian’s portrayal of pseudo-intellectualism while on stage. *Playboy* commented that “his [Sahl] speech is salted with solid psychological phrases.”¹¹⁶ Reporters described Sahl’s act as “cerebral,” and claimed it contained “a never-ending supply of phrases parodying academic jargon.”¹¹⁷ For example, Sahl once joked about a bank robber slipping a teller a note saying “Give me your money and act normal.” The teller replied “First you must define your terms. After all, what is normal?”¹¹⁸ This sort of content made Sahl popular with free thinkers and “his original audience of students” from the regional campuses in San Francisco.¹¹⁹ Other comedians like Woody Allen used “strong overtones of surrealism” while discussing *Faust*, Dylan Thomas, and Marcel Marceau.¹²⁰ A 1950s men’s magazine entitled *Nugget* commented that Nichols and May were “two self-absorbed pseudo-intellectuals playing around with ideas a couple of sizes too big for them.” The publication also compared Shelley Berman’s act to Franz Kafka’s work.¹²¹ Compared to Sahl, *Playboy* columnist Larry

¹¹⁵ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹¹⁶ Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy,” *Playboy*, June 1957.

¹¹⁷ Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹¹⁸ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ “Y.M.H.A. Presents 2D Jazz Concert,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1962, 37; Arthur Gelb, “Young Comic Rising in Village: Woody Allen is at the Bitter End, a Coffeehouse,” *New York Times*, 21 November 1962, 26; Joanne Stang, “Verbal Cartoons: They Happen When Woody Allen Talks of Life, Death and Why His Toaster Hates Him,” *New York Times*, 3 November 1963, SM61.

¹²¹ Keating, “The Changing Face of Comedy,” *Nugget*, April 1959, 15-19, 32, 43, 70.

Siegel noted Bruce's humor was less cerebral and "further out," but the *New York Times* reported his act "required concentration" because he "Always . . . [used] familiar terms with history and psychology."¹²² Bruce had combined the hip language used by the beats while discussing intellectual topics.

It is no wonder why *Time* referred to the new comedians as "sickniks."¹²³ From "hip" lingo to the consumption of jazz music and the use of intellectual references, these comedians shared similar ideas and characteristics with members of the beat generation. Aside from being cool, the Beats were intellectuals and often highly educated. Sahl's future wife, Susan, made the connection between his humor and the beat movement. She initially suggested Sahl try his stand-up routine at the hungry i (whose i stood for intellectual) because it was located in a bohemian area in San Francisco also known as North Beach. According to Sahl, she stated, "The audiences are all intellects, which means if they understand you, great, and if they don't, they will never admit it because they will think it is whimsical humor."¹²⁴

This style of comedy that emerged during the 1950s defied the conventional form that developed in the Catskills. The new comedians pandered to a younger, "hipper" urban crowd; not vacationing families at resorts in upstate New York. They wrote their own material and presented their humor in a non-traditional joke form based on more intellectual or thought provoking topics. This does not discredit stand-up comedy before 1953; vaudeville comedians were consummate entertainers. But satirical comics honed

¹²² Siegel, "Rebel With A Caustic Cause," *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78; "Lenny Bruce, Uninhibited Comic, Found Dead in Hollywood Home," *New York Times*, 4 August 1966, 32; Gelb, "Comic Gives Shocks with Moral," *New York Times*, 8 December 1960, 44.

¹²³ "Nightclubs: The Sickniks," *Time*, 13 July 1959, 42-43.

¹²⁴ Sahl, *Heartland*, 12; "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

their craft without relying on physical comedy, borrowed gags or one-liners that “were more nakedly jokes.”¹²⁵ *Time* noted:

He [Sahl] does not tell jokes one by one, but carefully builds deceptively miscellaneous structures of jokes that are like verbal mobiles. He begins with the spine of a subject, then hooks thought onto thought, joke onto dangling joke, many of them totally unrelated to the main theme, till the whole structure spins but somehow balances. All the time he is building toward a final statement, which is too much part of the whole to be called a punch line but puts that particular theme away forever.¹²⁶

This new style that incorporated political and social subjects into humor while using a more conversational approach to their performance made Sahl and other satirical comedians unique and popular with the youth of the 1950s and appalling to members of the older generation.

Late into the decade, Sahl and other new comedians found enormous success, but they still had many outspoken critics. *Time* quoted comedian and member of Frank Sinatra’s Rat Pack, Joey Bishop, about their success. According to Bishop, “Those guys tried their hardest to make it our way; when they couldn’t, they switched.” He tried to downplay their rebellious reputation and further argued that “They all act like big nonconformists, but they’re all aiming to get on the Ed Sullivan or Steve Allen show.”¹²⁷ According to the *New York Times*, “old-time professionals” believed Sahl was a hack claiming he “never went through the rough apprenticeship of burlesque, summer resorts or third-string nightclubs.” They insisted that Sahl was “unable to sell himself to all sorts

¹²⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 23.

¹²⁶ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

of people night after night.”¹²⁸ Even so, nightclub owners paid Sahl \$7,500 for a week’s work by 1960.¹²⁹

Historian Joseph Boskin wrote:

Ultimately . . . humor about public affairs in the United States has been shaped by the contradiction between a democratic justification and a docile belief in formalities and authorized procedures. To put it bluntly, the theory of an open society has been thwarted by a political system so sanctified that humor cannot be brought to bear on its various components.¹³⁰

Boskin’s observation explains why some considered the new style of comedy “sick.”

The American political system was a revered institution, and critics of Sahl and his predecessors found it alarming that humor could be applied as a tool to discuss and in many cases criticize the cornerstone of American society.

Carlin claimed Sahl and his predecessor’s rejection of Catskill comedy changed stand-up for the better.¹³¹ *Playboy* claimed “only the prude and bigot fail to get the message.”¹³² The “young comedians” spoke for a younger generation growing-up in an uncertain time. As the Cold War loomed over the youth of America, some found a much needed release in humor pertaining to the rise in commercialism, societal hypocrisies, and the country’s foreign and domestic political situation. Even politician Adlai Stevenson

¹²⁸ Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM32.

¹²⁹ Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11;

“Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

¹³⁰ Joseph Boskin, Boskin, ed., “American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos,” *The Humor Prism in 20th-Century America*, 82-83.

¹³¹ Carlin, *Comic Insights*, 82-4.

¹³² Siegel, “Rebel with a Caustic Cause,” *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78.

and iconic actor Marlon Brando felt that Sahl's "irreverent wit and uncensored quality are what American comedy needs."¹³³

Many people who followed and supported Sahl and other satirists felt part of an underground movement; a movement that gave voice to a generation ready to confront the various challenges of 1950s America. Anthropologist Stephanie Koziski explained the role of the post-war comedian best. She wrote:

The comedian's routines are stories for the adult and like the myths in primitive cultures may answer his need for explanations of good and evil in human experience, help him manage fear and anxiety and by constant admonitions of what happens when there is social chaos, underline the normative outlines of his culture. They come to view their own culture in this perspective and the revelation that result, many standup comedian have all the markings of fine culture critics.¹³⁴

Furthermore, according to Koziski, the young comedian's popularity rested in the fact that they looked "deeper beneath the surface of human behavior at the thought forces at work in society," and they had "the capacity to stand outside themselves and to emphasize with people who are different in order to more fully understand their actions and beliefs."¹³⁵

The post-war comedians connected with America's youth by discussing the various issues they considered important. They pushed the comedic boundaries set forth by the Catskill circuit, and along the way they upset some critics and audiences, but also heightened America's awareness of their political and social surroundings. Comedy

¹³³ Mitgang, "Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl," *New York Times*, February 8, 1959, SM 32.

¹³⁴ Stephanie Koziski, Boskin, ed., "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," *The Humor Prism in 20th-Century America*, 110-11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

became a tool for social protest, and though not everyone laughed, all began hearing the voice of America's youth.

Chapter Two: A Pulpit in the Cellars

There was music in the cafes at night and revolution in the air. — Bob Dylan¹

On January 5, 1970, the *New York Times* reported, “After 20 years of feast and famine, the hungry i has finally starved to death.” The hungry i, a popular nightspot in San Francisco, was a nightclub that catered to college students, beatniks, and the intelligentsia. Why was this reputable newspaper reporting on what appeared to be a trivial event occurring three thousand miles away? The unnamed journalist and hungry i owner, Enrico Banducci, both agreed the famous nightclub served as a beacon for stand-up comedy during the 1950s and early 1960s. Banducci boasted, “The i was the leader. Other clubs looked to see who we booked.” The *New York Times* claimed this was the stage where many comedians “were provided their first important platform,” concluding that the hungry i’s closing “officially end[ed] an era that spawned a generation of very funny vipers.”²

Seventeen years earlier, in 1953, the thirty-year-old Banducci hired Mort Sahl and allowed him to hone his craft, though it took Sahl several months to make an audience laugh.³ Many popular comedians, including Sahl, Shelly Berman, Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Bob Newhart, Dick Gregory, Woody Allen, and Nichols and May gained notoriety after performing at the hungry i. Receiving most of the credit for discovering

¹ Bob Dylan, “Tangled Up in Blue,” *Blood on the Tracks*, Columbia CK HYBRID SACD-DS, 1975, CD.

² “hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

³ Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 12-4; Howard Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

these comedic talents was the proprietor of the establishment, but Banducci believed another factor played a role in their success. According to Banducci, “The environment was correct.”⁴

The hungry i became the venue that, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “was probably as important in the history of American entertainment . . . as the Palace was during the years of vaudeville,” claiming “it set a pattern for clubs throughout the country.”⁵ A guitarist for the folk group the Limelighters stated that the hungry i had “a reputation that exceeded its stars,” and described the club as a “mix between a coffeehouse and up-town cabaret.”⁶ Comedian Shelly Berman noted that the club hosted “the freshest, newest, and perhaps most incredible talent that America has had on any stage” while another performer noted that the i was “a place where the in crowd played.”⁷

The club’s distinguishing design was cramped and disorderly, and featured a small stage with a brick wall as the backdrop. The hungry i’s intimate setting created an atmosphere which allowed comedians to connect with their young audiences, and according to an employee of the club, it was a “springboard of dissent” against Cold War conformity.⁸ Performers and the hungry i patrons routinely critiqued 1950s society, and the nightclub’s setting produced an informal gathering of like minded people which in turn helped define the comedian’s performance as relevant, popular, and funny. This

⁴ “hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

⁵ Ralph J. Gleason, “Banducci Closes One i, and Opens Another,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1968, 16.

⁶ Thomas A. Cohen, *hungry i Reunion* (Long Beach, NJ: hungry i Productions, 1980).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

occurred because the spatial organization of the club and its environment directly influenced the comedian's performance.

The nightclub was nestled between Chinatown and Filipino-town in the North Beach section of San Francisco, and was a byproduct of an Italian coffee craze and small coffeehouse revival during the mid-1950s. This phenomenon started in Greenwich Village and spread to North Beach within a few years.⁹ Eric Nord, a friend of the beatnik community in North Beach, founded the wine and espresso bar as a place “where the inner man might be fed.”¹⁰ The original intent of the name was to stand for the hungry id or intellectual. According to Banducci, who purchased the club in 1950, the early appeal of the club was that “it was not a nightclub, but a place for people to come and express themselves in an atmosphere conducive to lovers of Piaf and Sartre and the existentialist.”¹¹

In 1968 city developers tore down the club to make way for a parking lot and Banducci moved the hungry i to the more lavish area known as Ghirardelli Square.¹² That same year Banducci stated that the new club, “has got to be a place for everybody.”¹³ The *San Francisco Chronicle* quoted him saying, “Bohemians and

⁹ Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 266.

¹⁰ “hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46; Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Backstage Books, 2004), 9-11.

¹¹ “hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gleason, “Banducci Closes One i, and Opens Another,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1968, 16.

existentialism is dead . . . I don't know what I'm doing. You'd think."¹⁴ Two years later that sentiment would come back and haunt Banducci. In 1970 he acknowledged that he "broke the atmosphere gap" when his establishment moved to Ghirardelli Square.¹⁵ This abrupt switch from an intimate wine cellar posing as a cabaret to an opulent five-hundred seat, split-level theater with plush chairs, carpeting, and a spiral staircase broke the connection between the audience and performer so completely that the club could not recover.¹⁶

Banducci accurately assessed the demise of his comedy club in the 1970 *New York Times* interview. The original hungry i and its successors were unique theatrical venues, but the i's rising popularity forced it to move from its original location and the club lost the appeal that had drawn in the original patrons. The new hungry i mirrored the typical theatrical settings, and in some ways seemed nicer. The restaurant and bar remained intact, but it had a larger stage, modern sound system, reserved seating, and extravagant feel. With all this the clientele lost the special chemistry, however, from the unsophisticated crude quarters that made the North Beach club special.¹⁷

The original hungry i's setting contrasted sharply with typical Catskill comedy venues, and played a direct role in the creation of a new brand of comedy. The club

¹⁴ Gleason, "Banducci Closes One i, and Opens Another," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1968, 16; Taubman, "Spawning Ground of the Offbeat," *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11.

¹⁵ "hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited," *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Gleason, "Banducci Closes One i, and Opens Another," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1968, 16; "hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited," *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46; Taubman, "Spawning Ground of the Offbeat," *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11; "Playboy After Hours," *Playboy*, June 1956, 9.

nurtured its comedians, enabling them to create a close relationship with and among the nightclub patrons and owners during their performance. Stage size, the intimate atmosphere of the club's cramped quarters, and the seating arrangement affected the comedic routine. Combined, these characteristics allowed the formation of political and social commonalities among everyone at the nightclub which enabled comedians to discuss various topics such as drugs, sex, and politics: a technique rarely attempted by stand-up comedians until the 1950s.

Sahl and other early satirists honed their craft in various small coffeehouses and nightclubs that started appearing in the 1950s after the hungry i's creation. In San Francisco's North Beach area the hungry i, Fack's, Purple Onion, Ann's 440, and Bimbo's gained popularity. On the opposite side of the country clubs named the Bitter End, Café Wah?, the Village Gate, the Duplex, and the Gaslight Café blossomed in Greenwich Village. In the Midwest, Chicago played host to Mister Kelly's, the Gate of Horn, and the original Playboy Club. The names alone demonstrate that something different happened in these places. The posh lounges usually reserved for stand-up comedy such as the Copacabana, Latin Quarters, the Empire, Rainbow, Royal, and Venetian Rooms that Catskill comedians frequented sounded colorful, festive, and exotic, and were commercialized entertainment settings used for escapism from reality.¹⁸

Unlike the original hungry i, the lavish settings of Catskill venues had large unforgiving rooms with an expansive curtained stage, an orchestra pit, massive crystal chandeliers, and numerous cloth draped tables. The venues usually seated five-hundred to one-thousand people, served high-priced wine and food, required a folded bill in the

¹⁸ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 3-45.

maitre d's palm for better service, and patrons repeatedly endured repeated pestering by photographers, orchid sellers, and cigarette girls.¹⁹ The entertainment offered at such places included the apolitical formulaic comedic style made popular on the Catskill circuit. Comedian George Carlin, who was fired for cursing on stage at such a venue, once claimed these establishments were for people who wanted to hear jokes supporting mainstream ideas.²⁰

The people who frequented these places were mainly white upper-class citizens, not the younger middle-class who frequented the hungry i and its predecessors. The names of nightclubs like the Bitter End, Café Wah?, and Bimbo's reflected the patron's overall feeling about the social and political climate during the early post-war years and a willingness to question societal norms. On his 1960 comedy recording, *At the hungry i*, Sahl discussed the social and cultural differences between patrons at the Copacabana and the audience at the hungry i. Sahl joked that the Copacabana was "not like this club [the hungry i] precisely," and the crowd laughed. The comedian also noted the only element of cultural diversity within the posh lounge were the Cuban busboys.²¹ People who frequented an establishment such as the Copacabana did not want to hear about topics like racism, sexism, and political restlessness, because much of the clientele within the Copacabana--knowingly or not--instigated or supported many of the social disparities satirists commented upon.

Not all comedians embraced the new comedic style being offered at the smaller clubs. *New York Times* reporter, Herbert Mitgang, wrote that some "assert they want

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁰ George Carlin, *FM & AM*, Atlantic, 92924-2.

²¹ Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

their comedians to make jokes, not to remind them of their troubles.”²² Catskill comedian Mal Z. Lawrence agreed. He claimed that people paid to be entertained, not informed. He believed satirical comedians talked down to people and made them feel ignorant because they did not use one-size-fits-all gags.²³ Lawrence’s statement assumes that satirical or topical comedians did not cater to a specific crowd, but the younger comedians performed in front of the growing bohemian subculture that existed in New York, San Francisco, and later Chicago.

At the time the original hungry i opened a large beatnik community already existed in the North Beach section of San Francisco.²⁴ Coffeehouses and nightclubs, such as the hungry i, allowed America’s youth, including the beatniks, to brood over the faults of the United States’ McCarthyistic climate while sitting for hours sipping on coffee, smoking cigarettes, and discussing liberal ideologies. During that time a folk music revival started growing with impromptu performances by musicians within these various establishments.²⁵ According to Banducci, Sahl and Lenny Bruce were “the earliest student rioters” along with the beatnik and folk music scene.²⁶ Satirical comedians recognized the similarities in political and social angst amongst the beatnik and folk music communities. They created a cerebral connection with both groups

²² Herbert Mitgang, “Anyway, Onward with Mort Sahl: A Nonstop Talker From Out of the West Finds that Iconoclasm Mixed with Comedy Pays,” *New York Times*, 8 February 1959, SM32.

²³ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 24-25.

²⁴ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 125.

²⁵ Fred Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), X.

²⁶ “hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

because their performances harbored intellectual thought and discussed issues the beatniks and folk connoisseurs perceived as important.

The establishments these various social groups frequented were usually labeled “coffeehouses” by patrons and the media, but it is important to note that political and social discourse occurred in many different places including coffeehouses and saloons. What links these places together are the clientele and the activities they performed within the designated space. Sociologist Ray Oldenberg discusses such a phenomenon in *The Great Good Place*. Oldenberg calls institutions including beer gardens, pubs, taverns, and coffeehouses “third places.” These third places all provide long hours of operation and make conversation its primary commodity. For example, their clientele can sit for long periods of time and enjoy the musical or literary entertainment provided for them. This atmosphere conveys a sense of ownership or a feeling of “home” for the customer.²⁷

Julie Lindquist supports Oldenberg’s notion in *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar*. She argues that by offering a third place to regular patrons of a working-class bar in Chicago, bars allow a platform for the customers to argue political issues and create a group identity centered on political ideology.²⁸ David W. Conroy also demonstrates the historical significance the tavern or third place played in controlling political power in *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*. He studied the Puritan and Whig Party attempts to control liquor licensing in Boston during the eighteenth century. Conroy reveals how particular

²⁷ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

²⁸ Julie Lindquist, *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

groups tried to gain social control and minimize political debate by limiting the number of taverns and therefore a political forum for its patrons.²⁹ Roy Rosenzweig essentially makes the same argument as Conroy in *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* by claiming laborers in Worcester, Massachusetts, gathered in saloons to buck various reform movements and create a class identity during the progressive era.³⁰

Sarah K. Wagner's thesis entitled *Indianapolis Coffeehouses: Selling and Consuming Community in the Twentieth Century* focuses specifically on bohemian coffeehouses. Wagner argues that for much of the twentieth century coffeehouses existed outside of mainstream culture and consumerism. This allowed the establishments to serve as informal gathering places for groups who did not desire to participate in mainstream culture such as the beatnik community.³¹ Collectively, these authors demonstrate that the "third place" provided a space that allowed like minded people to openly voice their opinion about various social and political issues. As a byproduct, these common traits permitted the coffeehouse consumer a sense of security, and provided a place from which they could critique the surrounding political and social world.

The hungry i was a third place. Banducci provided long hours of operation and socially conscious entertainment for his patrons. Nearly every comedian that graced the

²⁹ David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

³⁰ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³¹ Sarah K. Wagner, 2003 *Indianapolis Coffeehouses: Selling and Consuming Community in the Twentieth Century* (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Thesis).

hungry i stage discussed subjects once considered taboo. Sahl satirized American foreign and domestic political policies. Bruce drew attention to censorship, various hypocritical stereotypes, and conservative idealism. African-American comedian Dick Gregory highlighted racial injustice as the civil rights movement gained momentum, while Bill Cosby preached racial harmony, and Woody Allen, Phyllis Diller, and Nichols and May examined male and female gender roles within post-war American society.³² The intelligent and thought-provoking routines these comedians performed helped stimulate a discussion on the values of 1950s America because the hungry i catered to a specific clientele that pined for an opportunity to openly discuss such topics. With such socially conscious entertainment, the *San Francisco Chronicle* called these performances “A Pulpit in the Cellars.”³³

The club’s cramped quarters made this possible. *Playboy* magazine highlighted its uniqueness in a 1956 segment entitled “Playboy After Hours.” The columnist wrote:

We snaked down a long flight of stairs leading to the hungry i, a San Francisco jazz den split sagely into three rooms. Hungry we took dinner in a quiet, brick-walled sanctuary bright with modern art. Thirsty we sidled up to the adjoining bar. Mellow we repaired to the showroom, complete with a pint-sized stage and a regiment of directors’ chairs.³⁴

Comedian Shelly Berman’s simple description noted that the club contained “nothing more than a bare wall of bricks [with a] raised platform that served as a stage about twelve inches above the ground.”³⁵ This simple space revolutionized the way an

³² Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 5.

³³ “Sahl’s Path to Fame---A Pulpit in the Cellars,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 June 1961, 32.

³⁴ “Playboy After Hours,” *Playboy*, June 1956, 9.

³⁵ Cohen, *hungry i Reunion*.

audience witnessed a stand-up comedy performance, because it did not look like a typical theatrical setting.

Gay McAuley claims two definitive concepts create a theatrical atmosphere in *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. One is the physical space. This not only consists of the stage, but also the presence of actors upon it. The second concept is the representation of a fictional place upon the stage. Together these two notions define stage space. Traditionally, because the actors play fictional characters and act out a fictional story upon the stage, the performers can freely present cultural and political issues to the audience while present upon the stage.³⁶

The hungry i's role as a third place eliminated the stage space. The tiny stage did remain the center of activity, but the comedians did not perform in a fictional place, because they did not act out a fictional story. The comics did not adhere to a carefully choreographed stage role which is typically witnessed by the audience within traditional theatrical settings. Instead, their performances took on a conversationalist role. Comedians told long drawn out stories, loaded with humorous observations and quips, and mimicked normal conversation. That is an essential element within a third place. Since a comedian structured his or her performance this way, a more personal connection germinated between the audience and performer. As a byproduct, a group identity based on cultural, social, and political topics started flourishing and a fictional place became nonexistent.

McAuley also notes that the traditional theatre setting consists of two separate designated areas otherwise known as the "front of the house" and "backstage." The

³⁶ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 28.

members of the audience have limited access within the theatre. The “front of the house” or audience space includes the point of access to the building, the box office, restaurants and bars, and the auditorium. Since the audience utilizes the theatre as a social event, the audience uses this space to socialize, consume food and drink, make commercial transactions, and watch the performance.

The other space is the “backstage” or practitioner space. Typically the theatre workers’ access to the building is different from the theatre patron. It normally leads to the backstage area with dressing rooms, green rooms, corridors, and stairways. This clear physical distinction between the performers and the audience creates a separation between the two distinctly different groups, and allows the actor to prepare his or herself for their performance. It is this separation that makes the two group’s interdependence possible.

The area where the practitioner and audience spaces meet is the performance space, otherwise known as the stage, where the performers and spectators work together to create the theatre experience. With the absence of either group the experience would not exist. William Faricy Condee’s book entitled *Theatrical Space: A Guide for Directors and Designers* supports this notion. He notes that the theatrical experience relies on audience participation because a two-way relationship must exist between the audience and performers for a successful performance.³⁷ For example, if the actors performed without an audience responding to the performance then there is no theatre

³⁷ William Faricy Condee, *Theatrical Space: A Guide for Directors and Designers* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 35.

experience. Yet, though both groups must participate for such an experience, the division between the two groups still exists.³⁸

The layout of the hungry i and other imitations eliminated the practitioner space. Many of these places did provide a dressing room for the performer's personal use, but the audience never witnessed a comedian coming onto the stage from backstage. At the hungry i, Banducci usually announced the comedian's name and he or she appeared from the shadows of the audience space.³⁹ Therefore, the separation of practitioner and audience disappeared. This also strengthened the club's functionality as a third place. Through frequent visits and conversation amongst themselves, the audience created a group identity that included the performers. By witnessing the comedian coming out of the audience space and onto the stage a commonality instantly materialized between the performer and the audience.

The physical stage space helps determine how the performers and audience members relate to one another, but Condee also argues that a triangular relationship exists within a theater performance. The three elements included in this relationship are the actor's impact upon the audience as a whole, the collective response of the audience, and the effect of that response upon the individual audience member.⁴⁰ This relationship between the performer and spectator ultimately assists both the actors' performance and the audience's enjoyment. Condee notes "Without question, the idea of going to the theatre is the idea of joining the community of an audience . . . It has to be about the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

³⁹ Cohen, *hungry i Reunion*; Bill Cosby, *Cosbyology: Essays and Observations from the Doctor of Comedy* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 165.

⁴⁰ Condee, *Theatrical Space*, 35.

communal experience of sharing with other people the discoveries of the performance.”⁴¹

The theatrical experience relies on commonalities and intellectual exploration among a group of people.

The triangular relationship correlates to the theatre architecture by having the audience “gather around” the performer. According to Condee, the audience should partially or wholly encircle the stage because this occurs in natural settings. For example, when an individual addresses a group of people in the street the crowd naturally forms a crescent or encircles the individual wholly as they assemble.⁴² This demonstrates why many directors and designers advocate the audience seeing others in attendance at a theatrical performance. Condee’s theory asserts that in order for the individual spectator to be aware of and influenced by the collective response of the audience, it is best if he or she is able to see, in direct or peripheral vision, a significant portion of the audience.⁴³

The canvas chairs in the original hungry i enabled the audience to view both the performer and other club-goers. The directors chairs were askew and not lined-up in tidy rows. Unlike a traditional theater, people faced multiple directions for conversational and comfort purposes. This arrangement allowed members of the audience to move around and witness not only the comedian’s performance but also a multiple amount of people attending the show. Ultimately, the audience members witnessing common reactions to the comedian’s performance heightened social commonalities that define the third place. When the club moved to Ghirardelli Square Banducci noted that customers would have

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

“a hard ticket, reserved seat.”⁴⁴ The owner’s comment demonstrates the club’s transition from a loosely structured seating arrangement to a rigid theatrical setting.

Some performances also make certain the audience member wants to be “in the midst of it.”⁴⁵ In other words, the audience can become part of the performance by melding the audience space into the performance space. Stand-up comedy was successful in third places for this reason. The social and political correlations created within the third place allowed the audience member to be a critical part in the comedian’s performance with responsive laughter, but the visibility of the brick wall behind the comedian helped meld the performance and audience spaces together.

Condee stated, “If you walk into a theatre and see the back wall, the proscenium [the area located between the curtain and the orchestra] is somehow nearer.” The author believed that the visible wall behind the performer helped create a natural connection between the performers and audience members.⁴⁶ Behind the stage at the nightclub was a brick wall that Banducci stated people claimed was “the fame of the hungry i.”⁴⁷ *New York Times* writer Howard Taubman commented on the iconic backdrop in 1961 and noted it was a “motif of simplicity.”⁴⁸ Sahl said “I dig the brick” on his album *The Future Lies Ahead*, and wrote that many in the entertainment business believed “there is only one set that connotes you to the public and that is a brick wall.”⁴⁹ The comedian and

⁴⁴ Gleason, “Banducci Closes One i, and Opens Another,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1968, 16.

⁴⁵ Condee, *Theatrical Space*, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Cohen, *hungry i Reunion*.

⁴⁸ Taubman, “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11.

⁴⁹ Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002; Sahl, *Heartland*, 20.

others believed the wall projected the performance into the audience space, and according to Condee, Sahl was correct.

Condee bases this sentiment on a traditional theatrical setting, but his argument still holds relevance in understanding comedy clubs. The difference is the proscenium is defined differently in places like the hungry i. No curtain or orchestra pit existed in such establishments, unlike the Copacabana, Latin Quarters, and the Rainbow Room. The extravagant clubs set the performer far away from the audience. Defined spaces such as an orchestra pit created a visible distance between the audience and practitioner spaces. At the hungry i the brick wall marked off the proscenium at the back of the stage, and without a visible divide between the practitioner and audience spaces the front of the stage became the area “where two worlds collide.”⁵⁰

As Sahl understood, Condee argues that the audience’s relationship to the performance hinges on the area between the edge of the stage and the first row of the auditorium.⁵¹ In traditional settings the stage designer and director determine the configuration of the seats around the stage by deciding whether or not patrons will be packed against the stage or a visible gap will separate the audience from the performance. The goal in manipulating this area is clarity and transition. When audience members are up against the stage it implies they are involved with the performance because the boundary between the audience space and performance space is blurred. If there is a gap, the audience understands their involvement is much more limited.

For comedians and members of the audience, the brick wall became the visible structure that broke down theatrical space in the hungry i. The highly visible structure

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 39

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

behind the stage figuratively pushed the comedian's performance area toward the audience. This, along with the intimacy created by the spectators' close proximity to the stage, allowed the performance and audience space to blend together. In essence this eliminated the performance space entirely, leaving only the audience space intact. By annexing two of the three theatrical spaces, the comedian and patrons of the comedy club essentially worked together in the same space and eliminated the social hierarchy created by theatrical separation of space. The comedian could then freely comment on social and political issues while posing as another member of the collective group in the third place. The layout of the hungry i made it the ultimate third place.

The i's role as a third place proved popular. In 1961 Taubman claimed Banducci's business was "the most influential night club west of the Mississippi."⁵² The hungry i became a blueprint for many of the clubs that succeeded it. Long before cable television, the club and its imitators became the Comedy Central of its day. Only the best and brightest young comedians performed on the hungry i stage, and their success showed that their humor could resonate with younger audiences. In the club's heyday, it controlled which comedians performed on the nightclub circuit throughout the country by becoming a major feeder for other comedy clubs, because comedians effectively formed a connection with their audience while performing on the hungry i stage.

Throughout the 1960s more and more imitations of the club started appearing in cities nationwide, and the club's influence subsided because it's organic or spontaneous feel was lost. Aside from establishing the new hungry i in Ghirardelli Square, the standardization of this iconic establishment also lessened the appeal for such a place and

⁵² Taubman, "Spawning Ground of the Offbeat" *New York Times*, May 13 1961, 11.

played a role in the hungry i's demise. Sarah K. Wagner concluded that the number of coffeehouses as third places diminished as the demand and newfound profitability for specialty coffee increased. The coffeehouse business adopted a standardized formula which caused the loss of business uniqueness and group identity.⁵³ Robert Hollands and Paul Chatterton also support this claim in *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Culture, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power*. Hollands and Chatterton argue that the urban nightlife experienced a form of "McDonaldisation" or standardization and caused a lack of alternative or creative entertainment choices.⁵⁴

Banducci believed the original hungry i "wasn't a nightclub, but a place for people to come and express themselves in an intimate [sic] atmosphere."⁵⁵ His statement exemplifies the early allure of the hungry i as a third place; the driving force behind the hungry i's success was personal expression and conversation. Later Banducci's creation became homogenized, and its drawing power decreased. By the end of the 1960s people visited clubs similar to the hungry i everywhere across the country, further diminishing the club's influence on the comedic circuit.

At the original hungry i the audience had the freedom to choose where they sat. The folding canvas chairs were mobile, and the arrangement of the chairs rested on the audience, not the comedian or Banducci. Audience members situated themselves however they felt necessary as long as they did not impede on another person's seating

⁵³ Wagner, *Indianapolis Coffeehouses*.

⁵⁴ Robert Hollands and Paul Chatterton, *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁵ "hungry i Closes for Good on Coast: Lack of Satirists and Change in Audiences Are Cited," *New York Times*, 5 January 1970, 46.

space or disrupt the performance.⁵⁶ This changed when the hungry i moved to the five-hundred seat theater in 1968. The inflexible seating and clearly defined audience space in the new surroundings left a gap between the stage and seating area. This gap established a separation between the audience and performer, and the clientele's level of participation diminished. By the end of the 1960s the club had lost its influence and charm. The clientele and comedians quit visiting the club, and it slowly faded away until it finally closed in 1970.

Beside the club's relocation, Banducci also believed another factor caused the demise of the club. The hungry i and its imitators were "dying all over" by 1970 because the talent needed to sustain business demanded too much money. He claimed the television industry lured most comedians away from the club circuit with healthy financial incentives. Banducci stated that acts that once cost him \$500 a week demanded \$20,000 by the late 1960s.⁵⁷ The hungry i became a victim of its own success, and lost the power of the club's intimate setting.

The stacks of mortared brick that lined the back of the stage at the hungry i effectively created a personal, political, and social connection between the performer and audience by eliminating the practitioner and performance spaces once the comedian walked on stage. The club's setting was significant in generating successful careers for numerous comedians, but so were their performances. The comedians used specific language and politically laced content to sustain and develop a tight relationship with their audiences. Their acts reinforced the sense of political and social community that materialized within the walls of the hungry i and its imitators, and helped sustain that

⁵⁶ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

connection with the audience beyond the club's demise. The hungry i created a decorative tradition that still exists within comedy clubs today. When the club finally closed in 1970, Banducci kept a positive outlook on the situation by stating "A lot of fine people came through. It was a good twenty years."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Cohen, *hungry i Reunion*.

Chapter Three: Iconoclasts and Argot Hipsters

He sure was funny and he sure told the truth and he knew
what he was talkin' about. Never robbed any churches nor
cut off any babies' heads. He just took the folks in high
places and he shined a light in their beds. — Bob Dylan¹

The 1950s harbored a large share of cultural rebels that set the groundwork for the social and cultural movements of the 1960s. As the Cold War, mass consumerism, and Protestant conservatism loomed over the general public, the 1950s witnessed the birth of various movements which exploded a decade later. The Civil Rights Movement began in the mid-50s with Martin Luther King Jr.'s bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and Thurgood Marshall's successful defeat of the separate but equal law with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. Indiana University professor, Alfred Kinsey, started the sexual revolution with his studies on sexual behavior, and Hugh Hefner celebrated sexuality by publishing *Playboy* magazine. Betty Friedan began writing an article for *McCall's* magazine that later jumpstarted the women's movement and evolved into the book *The Feminine Mystique*. Teenagers, newly identified as a significant group, began listening to the African-American influenced music known as rock and roll, and purchased albums by artists such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and Carl Perkins. Films like *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Wild Ones*, and *Rebel Without a Cause* struck a chord with a younger generation struggling against

¹ Bob Dylan, "Lenny Bruce," *Shot of Love*, Columbia CK 37496, 1981, CD.

their parents' norms. The beat generation dropped out of mainstream society to experiment with poetry, jazz, Asian philosophy, drugs, and sex.²

Cultural historian Gerald Nachman wrote that “The 1950s, far from fast asleep, helped light the way for many of the cultural eruptions that followed,” but noted that stand-up comedians are overlooked when discussing the rebelliousness of the decade.³ He stated “Nearly every major comedian who broke through in the 1950s and early 1960s was a cultural harbinger.”⁴ Comedians were a significant and overlooked group of cultural critics during the early postwar years, but even if historians have not yet acknowledged their political significance contemporary observers certainly did.

The two most notorious comedians of the satirical comedy genre, Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, both received considerable coverage about their rebellious comedic styles. The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote that Sahl was a “professional rebel” that “has a look of a rebel: short, alight and sallow, with a mass of unruly black hair and slightly sunken cheeks . . . he has the intensity and seriousness of a rebel, though a rebel whose rebellion is above all cool and rational.”⁵ The paper also noted that he deviated from the typical stand-up style, “None of the conventional craft armamentarium is in evidence” while the *New York Times* called him an iconoclast and “a fresh voice in response to the lament that

² David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 23, 58, 189, 272-81, 295-307, 346-47, 363-65, 370-71, 412-13, 417, 420-23, 427-29, 435-36, 455, 463-65, 472-73, 540, 542-47, 554-62, 569-75, 591-97, 666, 669-70, 684; James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 30-31, 355-59, 371-73, 388-95, 400-402, 408-10, 449-50, 643-44, 661-62.

³ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Backstage Books, 2004), 4-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

⁵ “Sahl's Path to Fame---A Pulpit in the Cellars,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 July 1961, 32.

American humor is restricted by conformity, censorship or just old jokes.”⁶ The *New York Times* also claimed Bruce used “the argot of hipsters and jazz musicians,” and “blows sharp social comment” about “the American scene, for which he seems to cherish an affectionate repulsion.”⁷

Both comedians’ rebellious acts quickly became popular during the 1950s. At the start of their careers, each earned meager salaries. In 1953 Sahl began performing multiple fifteen minute increment shows a night at the hungry i for \$75 a week, but within a year his act had grown in length and his weekly salary skyrocketed to nearly \$1,000.⁸ Bruce’s career started in the early 1950s in Hollywood “burlesque night clubs,” otherwise known as stripclubs, as a master of ceremonies who performed comedic routines between stripteases. Later, he competed in amateur contests around Manhattan.⁹ According to the *New York Times* and his *San Francisco Chronicle* obituary, Bruce finally “broke into the comic business” at a Brooklyn night club for \$12 and a spaghetti dinner.¹⁰ Afterwards his salary grew to \$90 a week while also working as a part-time gardener to make ends meet. Later his weekly salary blossomed to between \$800 and \$1250 while working various comedic venues.¹¹ By 1960 both comedians earned substantially larger salaries. According to *Time* Sahl earned \$7,500 a week, and the *New*

⁶ Louis Gottlieb, “It Takes a Heap of Information to Mint a Mort Sahl Funny,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 February 1959, 27.

⁷ Gilbert Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

⁸ Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 12-19; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁹ Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Fireside, 1963), 31-35; Gilbert Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

¹⁰ Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28; “Lenny Bruce Dies--Narcotics,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 August 1966.

¹¹ Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 91-96.

York Times noted nightclubs paid Bruce a weekly rate of \$1,750 though he was on “the verge of renegotiating himself into \$2,000.”¹² With few exceptions these salaries remained constant during the early 1960s.¹³

The rises in pay rates demonstrate the popularity of satirical humor during the early postwar years. The media wrote about Sahl, Bruce, and other satirists because of their controversial content, and they also covered the nightclub scene because this brand of comedy was in high demand by the general public. These comedians spoke about topics that influenced everyday lives such as religion, McCarthyism, and the Cold War, topics rarely discussed on a comedic platform before. But why were nightclub patrons eager to laugh at the comedic content? The answer is Sahl and Bruce projected a stage persona that adopted the same rebellious values and ideology as the members of their young audience which allowed them to make humorous observations about the social, political, and cultural topics their audiences deemed important.

Historians, folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, literary experts, and anthropologists have examined the role of humor in society by studying all kinds of humor including political or ethnic jokes, folktales, comic strips, comedic films, literary humor, practical jokes, and stand-up comedy.¹⁴ Among such scholars, all agree that

¹² “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Millstein, “Man, It's Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

¹³ “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Millstein, “Man, It's Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959; SM28. Sahl generously reduced his weekly rate to \$5,000 when he performed at the hungry i. For smaller clubs Bruce offered to work for scale (\$125) plus a \$1.25 per patron.

¹⁴ Despite the range of scholarship few academics specialize solely in the study of humor, but names such as Constance Rourke, Lawrence E. Mintz, Arthur Power Dudden, Alan Dundes, and Joseph Boskin consistently reappear.

regardless of how a joke is presented—on film, in print, or in person—humor is a social and cultural reflection of society.

Collectively, these various studies conclude that humorous stories and joke structures are reused depending on the social and cultural climate, and that modern post-war humor reached a greater number of people by taking advantage of modern inventions including the radio, television, and audio recording devices. Sahl and Bruce's comedic performances embraced their social and cultural surroundings by talking about culturally sensitive issues while on stage. The 1950s media consistently made that fact known, but their use of politically-based content was not new to American society. Many scholars noted that political humor has been around since the founding of the country. Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill suggest, in *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury*, that "social, political, and intellectual events" spanning from the founding of the New World to the rise of the counter-culture "shaped humor." They also note that humor in America is not based on startling innovation, but rather renovation of comedic formulas popular in various cultures that date to the distant past. The authors find that old jokes never die because the same comedic formulas appear throughout American cultural history, but they seem fresh because the humorists' skill lies within adapting the joke into the cultural context of the comedian's present time.¹⁵

Jesse Bier's book entitled *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* acknowledged the cyclical nature of humor too, but also noted the "general profile" of American humor is "filled with skepticism, cruelty, and derogation, [and] a means of perspective between exaltation and destruction," but ultimately "drives for the truth behind the big and little

¹⁵ Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

stultifying lies of our national life.”¹⁶ Sahl and Bruce’s comedic performances drew upon these elements mentioned by Blair and Hill and Bier. A 1958 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted Sahl “has funny things to say about Eisenhower, [John Foster] Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover and [Douglas] MacArthur—all of them are sitting ducks for his skeptical attitude toward the contemporary world.”¹⁷ *Playboy* called Bruce a “free-wheeling iconoclast who pokes fun at some of the sickest aspects of our society” and noted that in 1959 he was “sick of pretentious phoniness of a generation that make[s] his vicious humor meaningful.”¹⁸

Bier’s description of humor in America approximated the portrayal of “sick” humor in newspapers and magazines during the early post-war years, but Bier believed, “The conditions of decline [of quality] in our humor” occurred at the conclusion of World War II.¹⁹ Arthur Power Dudden’s book, *The Assault of Laughter: A Treasury of American Political Humor*, made a counterargument to Bier that is essential to understanding the rebellious comedians in the post-war years. Like the previous authors, he noted the cyclical nature of humor, and stated that humor has been a staple used to target “human self-interest, self-importance . . . hypocrisy,” bigotry, complacency, and conformism throughout American cultural history. Dudden claimed, much like Blair and Hill, that the 1950s “sick” comedians did not invent comedic political critiques, but rather

¹⁶ Jesse Bier, *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 29-30.

¹⁷ Brooke Atkinson “Mort Sahl’s New York Revue,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 April 1958, 28.

¹⁸ Larry Siegel, “Rebel With A Caustic Cause,” *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78.

¹⁹ Bier, *The Rise and Fall of American Humor*, 29-31, 467-77.

crafted the material to serve the needs of their message.²⁰ Though numerous postwar publications portrayed Sahl, Bruce, and other comedians as the first to use politically-based humor, they were not pioneers for using such content. Their use of such material within the context of 1950s society made their brand of humor significant and “sick.”

Dudden argues that American humor includes characteristics such as skepticism, cynicism, mockery, and even deliberate cruelty that highlighted racism and sexism. Dudden also made clear that political humor in America “separates itself cleanly from serious protest writing and systematic revolutionary doctrines.” He mentioned that humor “attacks society’s follies and fools indiscriminately” and revealed the “highlights and lowlights between pretensions and achievements.” by emphasizing political, ethnic, and feminist ideas brought on by an outgrowth of publicly debated issues and controversial institutions, and that a humorist’s venomous outpouring described the nation’s cultural realities.²¹ James Feibleman and Joseph Boskin agree. Feibleman noted that comedy deals chiefly with current evaluations of the contemporary world, and that most punchlines of a joke highlight shortcomings within the comedian’s societal surroundings in his article, “The Meaning of Comedy.” Boskin argued that humor expresses rather than represses contemporary conflicts and anxieties in *Rebellious*

²⁰ Arthur P. Dudden, *The Assault of Laughter: A Treasury of American Political Humor* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962), 21.

²¹ Arthur Power Dudden, “American Humor,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 37, no. No. 1 (1985), 7-12.

*Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*²² Sahl and Bruce's humor fits these patterns.

Sahl's humor constantly critiqued the 1950s cultural climate. When the school segregation issue in Little Rock, Arkansas, became a national news story, one critic of President Eisenhower claimed that if the President were a man he would take an African-American girl by the hand and "lead her through that line of bigots into the high school." Sahl seemed to agree when he joked about why the administration was being so reluctant to get involved. "If you are in the Administration, you have a lot of problems of policy, like," he said, "whether or not to use an overlapping grip."²³ The comedian's cynicism attacked a foolish practice that highlighted a discrepancy in America's core values. Ten years earlier the American military, including African-American soldiers, helped liberate Europe during World War II, but the United States still upheld oppressive measures at home. Sahl's joke attacked a social folly while commenting on its pretentious nature.

Sahl's outlook on such topics gained notoriety through various new forms of media, including radio, motion pictures, television, magazines, newspapers, and nightclubs. These new mediums, according to Dudden, aided Sahl and other comedians to "become American humor's mainstream," and "steadily converted humor into multination business enterprise with manifold models and outlets."²⁴ Writer Gerald Nachman agreed. He noted the 1950s comedian "seeped in the national consciousness via the long-playing record" and "made overnight stars" of various comics. Local disc

²² Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997); James Feibleman, "The Meaning of Comedy," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 35, no. No. 16 (1938), 421-32.

²³ Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002.

²⁴ Dudden, *The Assault of Laughter*, 19-31.

jockeys spun their albums and soon comedy records became “both respectable and trendy” as people played the albums for friends and family, and memorized entire segments. This all gave the “renaissance comedians an electronic comedy circuit, and advance publicity when they went on tour.”²⁵

Though these new forms of media certainly played a role in why Sahl and Bruce became popular, it does not fully explain why audiences of the 1950s supported their style of humor. The comedians drew from a long tradition of politically laced humor, but earlier Catskill comedians felt such topics were dangerous to discuss on stage. Sahl and Bruce successfully incorporated political-content into their act through the use of their linguistic skills and the stage persona that they projected toward the audience. Sahl with his collared shirt, sweater, rolled-up newspaper, and rants about the political climate personified a college educated intellectual while Bruce portrayed a white hipster with his overly baggy suit, willingness to be brutally honest with his audience, and his abundant use of hip language. These personas helped the comedians to create an identity that their audience could recognize and accept because their comedic traits embodied the audience’s lifestyle and ideology.

The use of characterization and social critique was nothing new. Constance Rourke claimed in her book, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, that numerous literary greats such as Emerson, Whitman, and Twain created memorable characters which the authors used to evaluate their current societal surroundings.²⁶

Dudden’s *The Assault of Laughter* argues something similar and noted two major

²⁵ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 17.

²⁶ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

elements exist in political literary humor. One is the humorist's use of a fictional character to portray the writer's personal ideology. The second is the author's personal diatribe given as a personal perspective. Dudden claimed that humorist Will Rodgers, a comedian who wrote his own material and acted out a stage persona while performing, successfully combined the two elements by creating a persona of himself for a stage performance.²⁷

Sahl and Bruce harnessed Rodgers' use of characterization. Rodgers, Sahl, and Bruce all performed as themselves, but with embellished characteristics that personified an "intellectual," a "white hipster," and in Rodgers' case, a "yokel."²⁸ Early articles about Sahl noted how similar his satirical wit, comedic content, and political satire was to Rodger's work. The one major difference between the two comedians was Rodger's cowboy persona and Sahl's intellectual posturing, though *Time* noted that "Rodgers was lovable, and even his fans do not claim that quality for Sahl."²⁹ In his autobiography, Sahl commented on the comparison: "There's quite a bit of difference between Rogers [sic] and me. Rogers [sic] . . . impersonated a yokel who was critical of the federal government. I . . . impersonate an intellectual who is critical of yokels who are running the federal government."³⁰ Sahl's observation acknowledged that his comedic style stemmed from a long tradition of using humor to question the American government, but he claimed a higher intellectual ground by noting his work was more unforgiving when discussing politics. Sahl's persona represented an educated citizen who highlighted

²⁷ Dudden, *The Assault of Laughter*, 19-31.

²⁸ "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Sahl, *Heartland*, 87; Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 93.

²⁹ "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

³⁰ Sahl, *Heartland*, 87.

inconsistencies and hypocrisies in American politics while Rodgers played a simple-minded character who did not entirely understand the workings of the American political system.

Even today, contemporary comedians still hold Rodgers, Sahl, and Bruce in high esteem. In 1981, comedian Lewis Black and actor Mark Linn-Baker wrote a play entitled *The Laundry Hour* which parodied Christian television programs such as Jimmy Swaggart's popular evangelical telecasts. Black and Linn-Baker played evangelists from the Church of Comedy and noted the important influences of these three specific comedians. Black's character, Lew, stated:

I'm talking about franchises of mini-churches. Exact replicas of Our Smiling Church of Christ and the Holy Joke (sauna included) that we're building in Tucson, Arizona. This is where we will be housing our church's prize collection of relics.

(HOLDS UP A BONE)

. . . Will Rodgers' funny bone.

(HOLDS UP A JAR)

Mort Sahl's tongue . . .

(HOLDING UP A JAR)

. . . and Lenny Bruce's middle finger.

And you can purchase replicas of these relics tonight . . .³¹

The humor portrayed by Rodgers, Sahl, and Bruce made them legendary "relics" in the field of comedy. By pushing the comedic boundaries established by earlier predecessors both Sahl and Bruce became role models for contemporary comedians, but by examining some of their jokes in the context of their time and the audiences they performed for it is

³¹ Lewis Black, *Me of Little Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 210.

easy to understand why their humor was successful. Their oratory skill and their willingness to pander to a socially and culturally inept audience made Sahl's tongue and Bruce's middle finger funny.

Both Sahl and Bruce's work keenly display their culturally relevant personas. Sahl's humor and off-the-cuff comments while on stage were riddled with intellectual references even when their topics seemed banal. On his 1960 album, *At the hungry i*, Sahl joked about tanning:

What do you think about "man tan?" I'm philosophically opposed to it. I know, you know, because if you can't believe in the sun what can you believe in? You know? I know! [clapping and laughter from the audience] Thank you, thank you for the sun. I came to help you carry the sun Orpheus.³²

He also used intellectual comments while covering a factual mistake on stage. On the same album, while setting-up a joke, Sahl said:

Hey did I tell you about the joke at the University of Miami? They're ninety miles from Florida, you know. So uh . . . I mean, there's a Freudian slip . . . No they're ninety miles from Cuba.³³

Sahl's references to Orpheus and Freud demonstrate that he was an intellectual and expected his audience also to understand his references. Enrico Banducci, the owner of the hungry i nightclub, once stated that "There was a time when it was not smart to not laugh at Mort Sahl, because he said big words, and the audience wanted to seem intellectual."³⁴ On his album, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Sahl even acknowledged that he may have gone too far. In college, he joked, he knew a man who would use his own initials instead of a sigma symbol while deciphering statistical data, because the fellow

³² Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Thomas A. Cohen, *hungry i Reunion* (Long Beach, NJ: hungry i Productions, 1980).

student was the standard deviation. Afterward Sahl admitted that the joke was “for the intellectual,” and said “if you understand that joke you should call a government office because you are needed desperately.”³⁵ Sahl’s audience perceived themselves as being more educated than the average American, and his use of intellectual phrasing connected with his admirers.

Bruce developed a white hipster image that connected with the beatnik generation. His dialogues were littered with hip words and phrases. His infamous bit about accordion player Lawrence Welk’s broken English best personifies Bruce’s comedic image. Welk hosted a televised family-friendly variety show with an orchestra and chorus that performed bland pop songs. Bruce impersonated Welk interviewing a “hip” musician for a job in his band:

Lawrence Welk: . . . the agency send you over Mr. Glazer, and told me you’d be perfect boy for my band; you’re deaf. [laughter] . . . How come you don’t talk to me sonny?

Musician: . . . I got really good eyes to make it sweetie, you know. A lot of cats put you down Mr. [Welk], no matter what they say man you the best banjo . . . player . . . whatever your act is I know your sweet, you know. That’s the main thing, the swinger the rags, you know . . . like . . . I knew Bird [jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker] very well man. I got Bird’s act, see. I saw Bird, man, he was really tore up [high on heroin] the night I saw him. I know ‘em people. I knew Miles [Davis]. I knew Basie before I could count, isn’t that wild? OK, you know, so like really, if you want to do the thing, baby, like you dig?

LW: What the hell are you talking about? [laughter]

M: Hey ah . . . really, it would be pretty wild. Hey, I don’t want to bug you, but can I get a little bread in front?

LW: You hungry? You want a sandwich? [laughter]

M: No man, I need some money. When you get to know me I’m really a good natured slob . . .

LW: Alright, I’m going to sign you. Cause I’m good judge of character. [laughter]

M: Hey, I hate to cap out on myself . . . I’ve got a monkey on my back [heroin addiction].

³⁵ Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002.

LW: Oh that's alright. We like animals on the program!³⁶

Bruce's use of hip language allowed him to create an association with his audience because they most likely used it too. He stated in his autobiography that "jazz musicians liked me. I was the only hippy around" which meant his image allowed him to connect with his audience and critique society through a specific lens.³⁷ Many patrons who frequented nightclubs were considered hip and familiar with jazz. Bruce's references to jazz musicians and drug use pointed out the "squariness" that many bohemian and artistic people perceived of Welk and his audience.

Susanne K. Langer argued in her book *Philosophy in a New Key* that various forms of art, myths, and rituals are as symbolic as ordinary language, and, like the latter, can serve as a tool for observers to conceptualize an artist's ideas without the use of everyday language.³⁸ The comedian's exaggerated characteristics transmitted their oratory art toward the audience, and typified the same micro-culture that Clifford Geertz demonstrated in his classic article "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." Simply stated, Geertz argued that various symbols (i.e. the double-entendre of the bird and male genitalia) and the regulatory rituals pertaining to betting represented a microcosm of the larger social and cultural makeup (i.e. social status of the individual within the village) of Balinese society.³⁹ The same theory can be applied to Sahl and Bruce's comedic performances.

³⁶ Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 1, Fantasy, FCD-60-023.

³⁷ Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 93.

³⁸ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Mentor, 1942).

³⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays of Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-53.

Comedians like Sahl and Bruce, with their embellished characteristics, played the role of spokesman, much like a politician or community activist. Their comedic personas typified the characteristics and overall feelings about 1950s society that the young nightclub patrons possessed. The use of the stage and the comedian's willingness to openly discuss sensitive topics mirrored what the collective group was doing outside of the comedy club through social protest and beat literature.

In 1960 *Time* quoted historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. saying that "Sahl's popularity is a sign of a yearning for youth, irreverence, trenchancy, satire, and a clean break with the past."⁴⁰ *Time* also noted that Sahl "represents a new and growing feeling" among the younger generation.⁴¹ Nightclubs like the hungry i eliminated two of the three designated theatrical spaces which left only the audience space intact. With the club acting as a third place, the comedian performed within a microcosm that represented the younger generation of America. The nightclub helped promote the youth's "growing feeling" by bringing performers together with Americans who questioned the social and cultural attitudes of the United States during the 1950s. This is why Sahl's wife initially suggested that he try his comedic material at the hungry i. According to Sahl, she recommended the bohemian North Beach area because "The audiences are all intellectuals, which means if they understand you, great, and if they don't, they will never admit it because they will think it is whimsical humor."⁴²

Besides his intellectual persona, Sahl's oratory skill helped make the needed connection with his audience. Claude Lévi-Strauss noted in his article, "Linguistics and

⁴⁰ "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sahl, *Heartland*, 12.

Anthropology,” that language and culture are inter-related.⁴³ He said language is “a *part* of culture” and “a *condition* of culture” because language is “one of those many things which make up a culture.”⁴⁴ According to the author, language is integral in culture “because it is mostly through the language that we learn about our own culture,” but it also lays “a kind of foundation for the more complex structures which correspond to the different aspects of culture.”⁴⁵ People learn societal norms through language along with “logical relations, oppositions, correlations, and the like.”⁴⁶

Sahl and Bruce used their oratory skills, along with their exaggerated self-personifications, to connect with their audiences. Sahl stated, on his album *The Future Lies Ahead*, that “Everything I say is factual, not actual.”⁴⁷ The events he discussed were real, but his descriptions were sometimes exaggerated to keep the listener intrigued. Throughout their performances Sahl and Bruce made humorous observations that connected various social, political, and cultural relations, oppositions, and correlations for their audiences. It was these logical observations with a humorous bent about the world and their intellectual and hipster language that made them successful within the comedic field. Their use of language connected with their audience while also eloquently highlighting the social ills they and the audience deemed important.

Sahl and Bruce’s sporadic stream of comedic onslaughts demonstrate that their comedic content touched upon numerous social and cultural issues that their audiences

⁴³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Linguistics and Anthropology,” *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Double Day, 1967), 67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002.

felt were important like religion, sex, drugs, race, and hypocrisy in politics. For example, Sahl zinged some Christian based religious groups:

As you know there is a big scuffle in this state now about capital punishment. Uh, largely, oddly enough, the religious groups want capital punishment, believing you must pay for the error of your ways. Even if a man is occasionally executed unjustly. And they believe in that. Uh, even though they made a very large mistake once.⁴⁸

Sahl also joked that evangelist Billy Graham's annual religious report appeared in the financial section of the newspaper, and that the pictures he took at a Billy Graham rally were blank after he developed the film.⁴⁹ Sahl pointed out the hypocrisy between the teachings about murder within the Bible and support for capital punishment, but he also noted religion's connection to consumerism and its soullessness that many in Sahl's audience perceived as a cultural norm in post-war America.

Bruce also commented on the finer points of religion. Some in the beat and other outsider communities questioned the validity of western religion, and turned toward Asian religious practices because its philosophy more closely aligned with beat ideology.⁵⁰ It was this openness to religion that allowed Bruce to comment freely on religious topics.

One of his best known routines was entitled "Religions, Inc.," which touched upon the financial greed of numerous faiths and organized religion. Historian Richard Zoglin stated in his book, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s Changed America*, that Bruce's "acid re-creation of a Madison Avenue-style meeting of

⁴⁸ Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

⁴⁹ Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002.

⁵⁰ Waldman, Anne, ed., *The Beat Book: Writings from the Beat Generation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), xv. Information taken from the Foreword written by Allen Ginsberg.

evangelical leaders, was a brave piece of commentary,” and noted the comedian’s “swipe at commercialized religion . . . was years ahead of its time.”⁵¹ Besides, “Religions Inc.,” another bit entitled “Tits and Ass” touches upon the moral confusion caused by religion. Bruce asserted that the appeal of Las Vegas is based on sexual temptation. The comedian noted that religious leaders objected to the dirty language and sexual innuendo used within the city limits. Bruce highlighted the paradox between the religious viewpoint that sex is sinful, and the fact that lust or a healthy sexual appetite is a necessity for procreation. He states in a fictitious conversation with a religious leader:

Lenny Bruce: Titties are dirty and vulgar?

Religious Leader: No, it’s the words. It’s the way you relate.

LB: Are you sure it’s the word, and not the titty that’s dirty to you?

RL: It’s the words.

LB: Alright, suppose we change the words to *tuchuses* and *nay-nays*.

RL: Well, that’s a little better. That’s . . . an anti-Semitic idiomatic, your Anglo-Saxon idiomatic. So why don’t we change it . . . [to] Latin, *gluteus maximus pectoralis majors*. That’s about the cleanest.

LB: Clean to you, but dirty to the Latins.⁵²

Bruce demonstrates his hipness and connection to the Jewish community by initially using idioms for the female breasts and backside and later Yiddish slang. He also shows how discussions on appropriate language pertaining to the female anatomy to appease conservatively religious people can be ludicrous. Sex is a natural aspect of life, but western religion possesses a specific set of beliefs that sex should not be discussed or performed outside the confines of marriage. The beat lifestyle contained a looser perception about sex in which people had multiple partners outside of marriage.⁵³ Bruce

⁵¹ Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 12.

⁵² Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific, CDP7243 8 34020 2 1.

⁵³ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307.

argues that the topic is not dirty, but instead it is an activity that all people regularly think about and engage in.

Bruce also questioned the logic of religious thought when he stated:

So Christ and Moses in Heaven; I don't know where it is. I know it's not up there, cause I believe that the earth revolves, see? And sometimes you can go to Heaven at 12:07, and go to hell at 6:30. It would be a great name for a book, *Hell is to the Left*.⁵⁴

Like many in his nightclub audience, Bruce demonstrated his spirituality by not denying heaven and hell exists, but by adhering to scientific thought. The conservative atmosphere of the 1950s witnessed a rise in the belief of the Christian faith, but Bruce and the members of his audience possessed varying opinions about religion and spirituality.⁵⁵ The comedian pointed out the illogical concept of the whereabouts of the heaven in hell because of the scientific knowledge of planetary movements, and freely discussed this aspect because his audience's conception of religion was more open to interpretation. The beats based their ideology on living a virtuous life on earth and not on obtaining entrance into heaven in the afterlife.⁵⁶ Bruce felt at ease to be frank and note such conundrums.

Besides religion, both Sahl and Bruce made humorous observations about sex, drugs, and race relations, all topics of political interest to the intellectual and hipster crowds. Of course, Bruce's bit entitled "Tits and Ass" openly discussed sex, but Sahl's technique was more discreet. On his album, *At the Hungry i*, he joked:

⁵⁴ Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific, CDP7243 8 34020 2 1.

⁵⁵ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 669.

⁵⁶ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307; Waldman, Anne, ed., *The Beat Book: Writings from the Beat Generation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), xv. Information taken from the Foreword written by Allen Ginsberg.

The Guantanamo naval base, Castro has been cutting them off day by day and the American papers are pretty, you know, scorched about it. And he's been, uh, first of all he wouldn't let the water supply in according to them. Then he tried to organize three-thousand Cuban laborers there...then it said Castro has closed down these houses-of-ill-fame. Which ring the naval base there. So I knew eventually Castro would go too far.⁵⁷

In 1959 Fidel Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista and took control of Cuba. As Cold War fears mounted, many Americans feared this new regime because of Castro's communist ties and the country's proximity to the United States. Sahl's observation tied Cold War politics to the United State's conservative outlook on sex. At the time many newspapers commented on Castro's actions toward the American naval base in Guantanamo, and showed concern that the American government might lose its foothold in Cuba. The United States was partly to blame, however, because it had supported Batista's brutal dictatorship which ultimately led to Castro taking control of Cuba.⁵⁸ Sahl highlighted this discrepancy by commenting on Castro's attempt to control the sexual morals of the Cuban people; much like how the American conservative ideology dictated sexuality in during the 1950s. Sahl's observation showed that the United States' belief structure was no better or worse than the communist run Cuban government under Castro.

One topic Sahl rarely breeched, unlike Bruce, was drugs. Bruce openly discussed narcotics and its usage on stage. Bruce's audience of musicians, college students, and hipsters were open about the subject, and this permitted him to discuss the topic on

⁵⁷ Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

⁵⁸ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 715-27.

stage.⁵⁹ For example, Bruce once joked that the Frank Sinatra movie about a drug-addicted gambler entitled *The Man with the Golden Arm* was too cliché for a Hollywood portrayal of a junkie. Bruce said:

Isn't there one producer in Hollywood with guts, who is hooked, who will do . . . a picture showing the bright side of it [drug addiction]. A well adjusted narcotics user and his family. 'We put a little away each week for our habit.' You know, many people say 'why use narcotics.' Why not!?'⁶⁰

Bruce's humor hinted at the fact that many working in Hollywood used drugs, and his spoof poked fun at the ideal 1950s nuclear family and consumerism. The younger generation in his audience questioned traditional or mainstream values of the 1950s, and accepted that many American families did not resemble the ones that conservative America envisioned. Bruce's take was that parents could also save money for drugs. The comedian's comment implied that many citizens used all sorts of drugs to uphold their vision of the United States, and his knock on consumerism stemmed from the rise in available goods and services during post-war America.⁶¹ Young families could save their money and purchase consumer products that earlier generations could never afford, but by expanding the vast range of available products to include illegal drugs he made consumerism seem ridiculous.⁶²

⁵⁹ Waldman, *The Beat Book*, xvi-xvii. Information taken from the Foreword written by Allen Ginsberg; Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 301.

⁶⁰ Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 1, Fantasy, FCD-60-023.

⁶¹ Waldman, *The Beat Book*, xiii-xvii. Information taken from the Foreword written by Allen Ginsberg; Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 295-307.

⁶² Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 134-37, 139-42, 146

Bruce even parodied a commercial about selling drugs. He impersonated a radio or television announcer and joked that this is a “commercial . . . which you’d never hear anywhere:”

Commercial Actor One: I don’t know what the hell it is Bill, I’ve been smoking this pot all day and I still can’t get high on it.

Bill: What kind are you smoking?

CAO: Oh, marijuana is the same isn’t it?

Narrator: That’s the mistake a lot of people make!⁶³

Again, the comedian’s comedic routine questioned mainstream commercialism.

According to David Halberstam, advertising in the 1950s “was not simple old prewar capitalism, this was something new—capitalism that was driven by a ferocious consumerism, where the impulse was not so much about what people *needed* in their lives but what they needed to consume in order to keep up with their neighbors and, of course, to drive the GNP endlessly upward.”⁶⁴ Radio and television of the 1950s advertised fictionalized scenarios and short repetitive statements about what to buy and how to use specific products. Bruce’s satire of such an advertisement about drugs demonstrated his contempt for the over saturation of the American marketplace.

An area of content that Sahl focused on more than Bruce was straight political humor. Sahl’s performances were focused almost solely on the absurdities of the United States’ federal government. For example, one joke revolved around the fact that President Eisenhower served in the military for most of his life, and received government sponsored health care while in the military and serving as President of the United States:

President Eisenhower spoke to them [the American Medical Association], and he said ‘Uh, we . . . socialized medicine is in Canada, but it shouldn’t be here.’ And the doctors dug that. I’d say that’s reaching your audience

⁶³ Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 2, Fantasy, FCD-60-024.

⁶⁴ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 506.

pretty well . . . And then the President said, ‘Canada is much too close and as far as I’m concerned Socialized medicine, you know, [if] the doctors were paid by the government it would destroy their incentive and hospital facilities would be chaos.’ And of course this bitterness, on the part of the President, uh, has it’s origin in the bad treatment he’s received in government hospitals, as you know.⁶⁵

Sahl’s joke questions the hypocrisy of the President receiving government funded health care as a government employee. During his Presidency, Eisenhower suffered a heart attack, stroke, and was struck with ileitis which required a stomach operation.⁶⁶

Government doctors monitored and cared for these ailments, and they did not lose their “incentive” because the government paid the bill. Sahl’s observation came during a time when the American government sponsored the G.I. Bill that aided returning veterans in receiving a higher education and low-interest home and business loans.⁶⁷ The comedian could not understand how the G.I. Bill, which helped fuel the economic boom during the 1950s, could be considered a good program while government sponsored health care for Americans would lead to doctors underperforming in their profession.

The comedian also commented on how out-of-touch American politicians were with the general population. Sahl stated:

He [Nixon] flies out the next day and he’s got, in the plane with him, he’s got . . . Admiral Hyman Rickover [four-star admiral in the United State Navy] to show the Russians we have no discrimination. And he took an observation team of industrialist made up of the President of IBM, the President of, uh, of Inland Steel, and the Chairman of the Board of the Chase Manhattan Bank. So that the Russians could see what we’re really like.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

⁶⁶ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 700-02

⁶⁷ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 8, 14, 55, 68, 367.

⁶⁸ Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

Sahl's observation concludes that most Americans, including the middle-class people in his audience, were not wealthy and powerful people like the businessmen Nixon took over to Russia. During the last years of Eisenhower's presidency, the debate over the missile gap between Russia and the United States (which did not exist) grew to preposterous proportions because both Republicans and Democrats did not want to look weak to the American public. The Cold War spiraled out of control by the late 1950s, and Eisenhower, who was being depicted by the press as "addled, goofy, [and an] ineffectual figure," tried to make the U.S. look good to the Russian people by sending these representatives.⁶⁹ Many people who frequented the nightclub scene felt underrepresented and were critical of the federal government. Eisenhower's choice of representatives fueled their frustration, because it proved his aloofness. He sent these men to Russia to impose the United States' military and industrial might on their government, but Sahl's joke highlighted that most Americans did not possess power and wealth that the Eisenhower tried to typify as the average American citizen.

Sahl also joked about the Cold War's intrusions caused by the Federal Bureau of Instigation (FBI) and the red scare. He said:

On it [a book from the FBI], it tells how many people are in the Communist Party in America. And says, uh, that there are less than four-hundred, uh, you know, Communists in America. And that half of them are FBI agents . . . Interesting huh? They are going to be betraying each other at the meetings, right?⁷⁰

Between the years 1947 and 1949 the FBI and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) began looking for communist infiltrators. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, based many of his investigations on gossip and hearsay which only

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 700.

⁷⁰ Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

heightened American's fears about communist subversion and cost many citizens their livelihood and reputation. Anyone the government deemed associated with the communist party was prosecuted, deported, or excluded from immigrating to the U.S. Sahl's comment highlights the FBI's overzealous approach to investigating the communist party. In response, Americans worried about an unrealistic threat because very few communists actually lived in the United States.⁷¹ Much of his audience, including Sahl himself, was considered anti-establishment and possibly communist during the early post-war years. This common sentiment made Sahl's joke about the FBI trying to subvert un-American activity funny.

Besides communists, the FBI also investigated the members of the Civil Rights Movement as it gained momentum during the 1950s. During the start of the Civil Rights Movement Sahl joked that minorities should take immediate action to rectify the various injustices they endured. President Eisenhower addressed the American Medical Association in Atlantic City, Sahl said, "Where people are pushed along in those [wheel]chairs by members of minority groups. Who should push them off the pier and thereby practice eugenics."⁷² The comedian's take on the racial situation was more extreme than Martin Luther King Jr.'s practice of non-violence. This statement called for drastic measures from African-Americans, much like Malcolm X would later advocate, to stand up to racist attitudes and oppression that had hindered their economic, social, and political advancement in American society.

Bruce used his humor to show the ridiculousness of segregation and racial stereotypes instead of advocating drastic action:

⁷¹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 187-203.

⁷² Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

Now this is what I call over-emotionalism. There's a kid who's stuck in a well, and the headlines scream for six days '*Child Trapped in Well! . . . Nation Awaits in Visual.*' In the meanwhile, you can go in any cosmopolitan city and still see in the classifieds 'Orientals may buy here,' 'Negros may buy here,' and one *shmuck* gets caught in the well and everyone stays up for a week.⁷³

One of Bruce's most infamous bits entitled "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties" demonstrates his willingness to openly use racist language and attitudes to highlight racial deprecation. In the bit, the comedian engaged in a conversation with an African-American at a party.

I want to have you over to the house, but I got a bit of a problem now, and I don't want you to think I'm out of line . . . but I got a sister. And I hear that you guys . . . [laughter] . . . you know, it's my sister . . . and . . . well, I'll put it to you a different way, you wouldn't want no Jew doing it to your sister would ya? [laughter] That's the way I feel. You know, I don't want no coon doing it to my sister . . . no offense. You know what I mean?⁷⁴

Interracial sex was taboo during the 1950s, and some used its practice as the basis for violence against African-Americans. The most infamous incident was the murder of Emmett Till in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, in 1955. After whistling at a white woman in a grocery store, Till was kidnapped, beaten, murdered, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River by the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, John Milam. Authorities arrested the men and tried them for their crime after Till's mother displayed his mangled body for four days in his hometown of Chicago, Illinois. An all-male, all-white jury deliberated for one hour and returned with a verdict of not guilty.⁷⁵ Bruce's joke directly questioned the racist attitudes toward interracial relationships, and even showed that the issue also affected Jewish-Americans too.

⁷³ Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 1, Fantasy, FCD-60-023.

⁷⁴ Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 2, Fantasy, FCD-60-024.

⁷⁵ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 395-96.

All of these humorous examples signify how some groups in American society were ready to challenge the status quo. Sahl's jokes highlighted the need for action while Bruce's comments poked fun at misplaced sympathies and stereotypes. Many who attended these comedians' performances felt a change was needed, and found humor in highlighting the numerous injustices in American society because their personas, common attitudes with audience members, and the nightclub's layout allowed them to critique society within a group already critical of American culture.⁷⁶

Sahl and Bruce's work signified the rebelliousness of the younger generation during the early post-war years. They made a connection with their audiences because they developed stage personas that mirrored the hip and rebellious factions that questioned American society's follies. Sahl posed as an intellectual whose witticism showed his mistrust of the same social, cultural, and political values of the conservative 1950s environment that many young Americans felt. Bruce pushed the comedic boundaries by using words and topics never discussed on stage before, and tapped into the bohemian value system. They both drew from a long tradition of using humor as a means to tap into such social commentary, but Sahl's "bitey" humor and Bruce's "abstract-expressionist" comedy was the first time such humor was used in such a medium.⁷⁷

Politically-laced literary and artistic humor had come before, but Sahl and Bruce's comedic style resonated with the other cultural rebels of the 1950s. Their ability to use

⁷⁶ Waldman, *The Beat Book*, xvi-xvii. Information taken from the Foreword written by Allen Ginsberg; Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 301.

⁷⁷ Jim Walls, "Out in Left Field: Highbrow Comic Mort Sahl Has a Busy Present and Bright Future," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 February 1955; 6, Millstein, "Man, It's Like Satire," *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

their oratory skill to discuss 1950s culture and finding humor with such content is a testament to their comedic gifts. Their comedy resonated with an entire generation, but their talent also stemmed from their Jewish backgrounds, and it helped create a Jewish identity that lacked a definition in the United States after World War II. They performed in front of a supportive audience, but their Jewish background also made their position as cultural critics problematic.

Chapter Four: Worrisome Laughter

He was an outlaw, that's for sure, more of an outlaw than you ever were . . . He just had the insight to rip off the lid before its time. — Bob Dylan¹

In 1966 *Time* magazine indicated that television and nightclub audiences had grown tired of comedic critiques about American society. “American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter” examined the American comedian’s ability to poke fun at serious or taboo subjects while still making people laugh, but the underlying theme of the essay was the death of American comedy. The article noted various factors that led to the “dark ages of American humor” including humorists “making second careers as commentators who probe and pontificate . . . American manners, morals and mores.”² The author also characterized audiences becoming “shockproof to spoofs on death and destruction” as “neither a renaissance nor a reformation” for comedy in America because, they argued, the humorist’s function is to be “society’s mocking bird, not its vulture.”³

The reporter viewed the state of American comedy as not only being “entrenched in the bedroom, but [also] . . . increasingly being brought into the bathroom,” and the writer believed the main contributing factor for such a change was the “considerable Yiddishization of American comedy.”⁴ Many of the reporter’s attacks aimed at Jewish humorists were unjustified, but it is important that he or she had noted that the “Jewish experience is flavored with some sour salt” and “a lot of hostility” rested within their humor.⁵ The author commented that the “majority of top U.S. humorists are Jewish,” and

¹ Bob Dylan, “Lenny Bruce,” *Shot of Love*, Columbia CK 37496, 1981, CD.

² “American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter,” *Time*, 4 March 1966, 46-47.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

they had been successful in various entertainment mediums including movies, situation comedies, the stage, late night television, and in print by relying on “Yiddish humor” which included discussing the “Jewish experience” and using “Jewish words, phrases and jokes.”⁶

Twelve years later, in 1978, *Time* questioned why Jews constituted 80% of the nation’s professional comedians.⁷ Their answer came from psychologist Samuel Janus, who spent ten years of research on the subject, and presented his findings at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. According to Janus, what makes Jewish comics funny “is their pain.”⁸ He claimed Jews dominated the American comedic industry because of their outsider status in American culture, noting that “Jewish humor is born of depression and alienation from the general culture” and they used comedy as a “defense mechanism to ward off the aggression and hostility of others.”⁹ He also reported, after interviewing 76 Jewish humorists including Milton Berle, George Burns, and Mort Sahl, that many comics were “ambivalent about their Jewishness.” They mostly talked about their work for non-Jewish causes, experienced traumas in early childhood, constantly worried, and always worked toward acceptance.

Both articles demonstrate what most scholars believe is the link between Judaism and humor: a yearning for acceptance coupled by defensiveness. This assessment ties directly into the style of comedy performed by Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Humor, and more specifically, stand-up comedy performances helped comedians like Sahl and Bruce to

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “Analyzing Jewish Comics,” *Time*, 2 October 1978, 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

personify Jewish identity within their performances. Ethnic identity overlaps with and is inseparable from class, gender, and racial identity, but Sahl and Bruce's work became a performance of a particular variation of Jewish identity--one that was self-critical, modern, bourgeois--and one that is assimilationist in that it emphasizes a decidedly misogynistic patriarchy and invokes overtly racist tropes.

During the last half of the twentieth-century, academics argued a Jewish cultural identity crisis in American society loomed over a large percentage of Jewish Americans. Scholars reasoned that most Jews loosely practiced the Jewish faith in the post-war years and therefore assimilated into American society after World War II.¹⁰ There is little debate refuting this argument, but some recognize another important Jewish contribution to American popular culture in the past sixty years that enabled the projection of Jewish identity to a broader percentage of American people: humor.

Throughout history Jewish humor assured physical, emotional, and cultural survival from anti-Semitic foes, and that same tactic secured group unity and preserved Jewish identity in America. Embracing humor as a cultural trait distinguished Jewish culture among a larger sociological structure, and assured the Jewish community at large that many who did not practice the Jewish religion still considered themselves culturally Jewish. Judaism and humor have been linked together for hundreds of years, but Jewish performers became more popular at the end of World War II with the help of such technological advances as the television and comedy phonographs. With the rising

¹⁰ Edward S Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since World War II*, 5 vols., vol. 5, *The Jewish People in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992); Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society: Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *The Lakeville Studies* (New York: Basic Books, 1967).

popularity of such comedians as Sahl and Bruce a great debate has surfaced. Is this wide acceptance in popular culture an indication that the Jewish community assimilated into American society? Or does the writing and performance of comedic routines by Jews retain Jewish culture?

On the surface, American consumption of Jewish humor resembles assimilation because the United States became more accepting of the Jewish culture, but the answer is not so simple. “Despite this seeming acceptance,” according to historian Karen Brodtkin, “many Jews remained uneasy.”¹¹ Some Jews feared the anti-Semitism of the 1920s and ‘30s would return as a reaction to the growing political conservatism of the Cold War. Brodtkin noted that “Antiradicalism and anti-Semitism sometimes seemed to overlap in McCarthyite anticommunism,” but claimed that Jews played an important role in the “wider cultural current of American unhappiness with conservatism and materialism that saw the loss of one’s soul as among the fruits of success.”¹² One way Jews contributed to this movement was through stand-up comedy.

According to Brodtkin, the immediate post-war decades witnessed a group of “mainly Jewish public intellectuals” who “spoke to the aspirations of many Jews” while developing “a new, hegemonic version of Jewishness as a model minority culture” that discussed the privileges of white maleness and entitlements in the United States. In the process of discussion, these Jewish intellectuals “constructed a male-centered version of Jewishness,” that Brodtkin claimed was specifically a “Jewish form of whiteness.”¹³

¹¹ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 144.

¹² *Ibid.* 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Brodkin noted that in popular culture and everyday life Jews related to this version of Jewishness ambivalently. Jews remained wary about the extent to which America's embrace was real, and many held reservations about mainstream culture. They also were "ambivalent about Jewishness itself." According to Brodkin, Jews expressed this ambivalence in literature, self-parody, and social critique which allowed Jews to articulate fears about the growing uneasiness of American affluence and capitalism during the 1950s. Thus the early post-war decades found Jewish artists and intellectuals in the unusual position of speaking in public forums as white Americans and cultural critics of 1950s whiteness.¹⁴

Sahl and Bruce's comedic performances adhere to Brodkin's argument. Both Jewish comedians used their platform to criticize American culture while also appealing to white audiences. During the 1950s and early 60s stand-up comedy performed by a small sector of Jewish comedians became a reflection and response to the Jewish cultural position in American society. Jews had a long comedic tradition in the entertainment industry, but Jewish-Americans struggled to find a balance between cultural acceptance and retaining a cultural identity after World War II. Comedy furthered the status of comedians such as Sahl and Bruce as cultural outsiders because their self-critical humor gave comedians a platform to articulate Cold War fears and question American policy. Their comedy thus supported a broad social agenda while also performing an ethnic identity trait. In essence, stand-up comedy became a strange mix of cultural assimilation while also performing a version of white masculine Jewishness during a time when it was contested.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Since the founding of the United States, the Jewish-American community progressively distanced themselves from other Jews throughout the world. Jews came to America as early as the seventeenth century and lived in “general obscurity, making a point of attracting little attention to themselves and to their differentness.”¹⁵ Early in American history Jews lived in communities that functioned as support structures built around a synagogue. They routinely practiced their faith by observing the Sabbath, eating kosher food, and teaching Jewish traditions to their children.¹⁶ Their religious identity in America slowly dissipated to near extinction by the end of World War II. By 1945 Jews no longer lived in isolated communities. Instead, Jews scattered across the country and “Americanized” Jewish customs to suit group or individual needs. This, according to most scholars, led to the decline of Jewish identity in the United States.¹⁷

Jews moved away from tightly-knit urban settings during the 1950s for a variety of reasons.¹⁸ Mounting affluence encouraged the relocation of Jewish families to the suburbs, where a strong centralized Jewish community became difficult to establish.¹⁹ According to Edward S. Shapiro, this further removed American Jews from their sacred religious traditions. He argues American Judaism reduced the Jewish religion to such rituals as financial support for the state of Israel, remembrance of the Holocaust, and a periodical visit to the local synagogue. Jews stopped attending weekly religious services,

¹⁵ Hasia R Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁹ Sklare, *The Lakeville Studies*, 9-11.

keeping kosher, and observing the Sabbath.²⁰ Shapiro also noted the declining Jewish birthrate and increasing incidences of intermarriage throughout the post-war years as a sign of assimilation and a decline in traditional Judaism in America.²¹

Even as fewer Jews routinely practiced their faith, Jewish identity did not disappear. Stand-up comedy assured its presence existed during the post-war years. Some scholars who study humor agree comedy is a distinctive element that defines Jewishness within American society, but there is no clear consensus on how humor characterizes Jewish identity. Nor is Jewish humor easy to define. Does anyone who is Jewish produce Jewish humor? Does the content or comedic material have to be decidedly Jewish? What makes one Jewish performer more Jewish than another? Can non-Jews perform Jewish humor?

James D. Bloom attempts to tackle this problem in his book *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America*. He notes that writing, performing, and producing jokes occurs in various ways, and being Jewish does not necessarily mean the humor stems from Jewish faith or culture. Jewish writers and comedians play a large role in comedic popular culture, he says, largely because, Jewish humor is “outsider” humor. According to Bloom, what many perceive as Jewish humor is nothing more than comedians being funny; Jews just happen to be the majority of writers and performers within the comedic field. Bloom ultimately argues that Jews identify themselves, through humor, as members of a larger society rather than a distinct Jewish community. Jewish comedic writers and performers use the Jewish influenced self-critical style of humor to hold a mirror up to American society. Their parodies of Jewish American life make it

²⁰ Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125-26, 234-35.

easy to assume popular comedy in America is Jewish humor, but their references serve to make them less Jewish in American society.²² Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce's comedic work harnessed biting cynicism that questioned American norms which allowed them to be widely accepted by the American public.

In contrast to Bloom, a large percentage of scholars believe the Jewish community devised a distinctive style of humor that can be defined, and reaffirms Jewish American identity. The basis of their definition lays in Sigmund Freud's analysis of humor. He characterized Jewish comedy as distinctly self-critical and self-analytical.²³ Many theories on Jewish humor relate self-criticism back to identity. Sig Altman's 1971 book, *The Comic Image of the Jew: Explorations of a Pop Phenomenon*, states that Eastern European Jews considered the United States the most promising place to comfortably thrive as a group because they did not fear oppression in the U.S., unlike Russia and Germany. The possibility for Jews to be considered American yet still retain their Jewish identity influenced many to immigrate to the United States. Altman argues that along with their other cultural customs, immigrating Jews imported their self-analytical and critical humor, which he calls "Jewish self-irony." This comedy initially served as a survival mechanism while living in Europe. Jews survived hardships by laughing at themselves as individuals and as a group. Though Jews never considered their faith ludicrous, in many places around the world people considered members of the Jewish faith less than equal, and Jews often faced physical and emotional harm. In many

²² James D Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 155-60.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud, Standard Edition ed., 8 vols., vol. 8 (London: Leipzig, 1905), 111-12.

cases humor was the only cultural trait that alleviated the constant fear Jews faced on a daily basis. While living in Eastern Europe, many Jews mocked their identity to make light of serious situations and to show others the supposed “absurdity” of their culture.²⁴

Altman argues this strategy evolved into a distinct trait within the American social structure and “Jewish self-irony” became useful in another way. The Immigration Act of 1924 and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan helped institute anti-Semitism in the U.S. during the 1920s. Jewish immigrants responded by assimilating into American society—deviating from strict religious ideas and practices that governed the local Jewish community and “Americanizing” their cultural customs.²⁵ Though religious influences became less important in everyday life, Jewish-Americans retained their Jewish identity by using “Jewish self-irony” in two distinct ways. It mocked Judaism, which allowed acceptance into American culture, but also allowed Jews to hold onto a distinct cultural element.²⁶

Steven J. Whitfield agrees with the latter portion of Altman’s argument. His 1986 article, “The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor,” states that the generalization of Jewish humor as self-deprecating is true, and he too argues that it serves a useful purpose within the Jewish community. Much like Altman, Whitfield argues Jews have used humor as a weapon against oppression. Jews still feel like outsiders in the United States today because Christian ideology is the mainstay in American culture and that is why many Jewish humorists, such as Lenny Bruce, aimed assaults directly at the majority

²⁴ Sig Altman, *The Comic Image of the Jew: Explorations of a Pop Culture Phenomenon* (Rutherford: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 199-200.

²⁵ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 4-5.

²⁶ Altman, *The Comic Image of the Jew*, 200-03.

faith in America. Their intent is to emphasize the differences between Christianity and Judaism and retain a distinct Jewish-American identity in the process.²⁷

Both Altman and Whitfield's classification of Jews as "outsiders" refutes Bloom's argument. All three authors agree "outsider" humor exists, but Bloom believes Jewish and "outsider" humor are not one in the same. *Gravity Fails* claims Jewish humor does not exist because both Jews and non-Jews can be considered outsiders, but Altman and Whitfield argue that the outsider mentality is exactly what makes Jewish humor unique. The self-critical and self-analytical style of humor became central to stand-up comedy's success during the early post-war years. Jewish comedians harnessed this characteristic which became central to using comedy as a cultural criticism that highlighted social and cultural ills in American society. In essence, Jewish comedic themes and strategies informed stand-up comedy, and the Jewish comedian's influence was so effective that the new brand of comedy that developed during the 1950s projected a Jewish identity element upon the American public.

Though they wrote and performed self-critical humor for a large array of American audiences, Jews also utilized it during normal conversation to define their identity within the Jewish community. Dan Ben-Amos argued that Jews tried to keep their Jewishness intact by highlighting generational differences in his article, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor." A cultural divide formed within the Jewish community between first generation immigrants and American-born second and third generation Jews. Members of the Jewish community consistently recited self-critical humor to other members of the community that highlighted this cultural difference. Ben-Amos agrees

²⁷ Stephen J Whitfield, "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor," *Modern Judaism* 6, no. 3 (1986), 247-51.

with previous authors that self-criticism defines Jewish humor and its usage is for the preservation of Jewish identity, but he argues that it is a myth that Jewish-Americans recite self-critical jokes as a defense against anti-Semitic rhetoric or to maintain an identity in the eyes of non-Jews in the United States. Instead, Ben-Amos notes that Jews used humor as a tool to set the parameters of what constitutes a Jew and how the Jewish community should collectively act to best represent the Jewish community within American society.

Ben-Amos noticed that first generation Jews retold jokes differently from the second and third generations. First generation Jews and their community leaders clung to as many religious practices as possible. Their jokes mocked second and third generations who constantly adopted American cultural elements that strayed away from Jewish traditions centered around the synagogue and community. For example, Rabbis traded the following joke about a priest, rabbi, and minister who came across a family moving into a new house in a suburb with one saying to the others:

“Mmmm, a new family. I wonder what religion, who is going to get them, which church.” So they said, “Well, the shades are up, let us take a look and see if we can recognize by the house, you know, whose it is.” So the Catholic looks into the house, peeps in, then says: “Oh, no, it is not one of my flock.” So the minister looks in and says, “Well, I don’t see any Bible that I can recognize, it is not one of my flock.” The rabbi says, “Well, let me take a look.” The rabbi takes a look and then says, “Oh yes, it is one of my flock.” They say, “What is it, you see a Jewish star or a *menorah* or something like that?” “No,” he says, “Wall to wall carpet.”²⁸

Shapiro noted most Jews no longer attended weekly religious services, kept kosher, or observed the Sabbath. Many first generation Jews saw this lack of religious dedication as

²⁸ Dan Ben-Amos, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 1973), 126.

a deterioration of the Jewish faith and community. Ultimately jokes such as this one, told by Rabbis and other community leaders, are a result of frustration and hostility toward members of their own community. Jewish leaders continuously criticized second and third generations, at least in their jokes, for neglect of Jewish values for materialistic reasons.²⁹

In contrast, the second and third generations mocked old world traditions and customs in their jokes by using such comedic techniques as a broken Yiddish accent.³⁰ The second and third generations still considered themselves Jewish and felt they were active members in the Jewish community, but saw a need for change within Jewish society. They perceived their world as a balance between the adoption of American customs and retaining their Jewishness. According to Ben-Amos, self-critical jokes are essentially a discussion amongst Jews on how they should portray Jewish society in America. By using self-critical humor on stage, some comedians presented the identity discussion to a larger and more diverse audience which personified a comic's Jewishness in a public forum.

Scholars also focused on specific Jewish comedic vehicles that both mocked first generation Judaism and enabled the existence of an ever evolving post-war Jewish identity. The humor portrayed the uneasiness many Jews felt about assimilation in the United States. One of the most notable Jewish comedic constructs is the Jewish American Mother (JAM). Martha A. Ravits' examination of the JAM in her article "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture," argues the Jewish Mother stereotype signified the concerns about the generational transition and

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

social change for Jews in the post-war years. The satirical portrayal of the Jewish mother became an accepted outlet for Jews' feeling pride about their group status and individual gains through assimilation, and the self-doubt about the resulting erosion of group identity and cohesiveness.³¹

The JAM is riddled with contradictions because she pushes her son to achieve material and social success in the United States while unwittingly undermining his progress with her ignorance of the dominant culture. As shown in the following joke, she is always overbearing with exaggerated maternal concerns while personifying garish ethnic manners and a materialistic nature.

A Jewish mother and her son arrive in a taxi in front of a large plush hotel on Miami Beach. The mother in a mink coat and much bejeweled goes in to register and she asks several bellboys to bring in the 2 trunks and 12 suitcases. After they do so, they ask if there's anything else they can do for her. She replies, "Would you please lift my 14 year old son out of the car and carry him up to my room?" "Oh," says one of the bellboys, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize he couldn't walk." "He can walk all right," says the mother, "but thank God he doesn't have to."³²

Another joke demonstrates the mother's need to have religious influences remain in her son's life by trying to convince him to live like a biblical figure.

How do we know Jesus was Jewish? He lived at home with his mother until he was 30, he went into his father's business, and he had a mother who thought he was God.³³

³¹ Martha A Ravits, "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture," *MELUS: Jewish American Literature* 25, no. 1 (2000), 9.

³² Alan Dundes, "The J.A.P. and the J.A.M. In American Jokelore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 98, no. 390 (1985), 457-58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 457.

According to Ravits, “Her social construction helped ease the tensions of cultural transition for second and third generation Jews,” by highlighting negative elements of both Jewishness and Americanization.³⁴ Second and third generation Jews received a constant bombardment of competing ideas from both the Jewish community and American society during the post-war years. First generation Jews wanted the younger generations to retain strict religious practices and embrace their ethnic heritage while American society encouraged the pursuit of higher class status and materialism. The younger generations emphasized these two societal pulls within the JAM to characterize their ambivalent position about what cultural traits they should adopt.

Alan Dundes not only studies the Jewish mother as a comedic outlet, but also the Jewish American Princess (JAP) in his article, “The J.A.P. and the J.A.M. in American Jokelore.” Dundes agrees the JAM is materialistic, overbearing, harnesses ethnic characteristics, and uses undesirable tactics such as making her son feel guilty to maintain control over her family and insure economic and social success in the United States. The JAM constantly impedes on the son’s pursuits because of her lack of understanding of American culture, but she means well by her actions and cares for the welfare of her son.

As for the JAP, she is a self-centered and unlikable version of the JAM. The princess is spoiled rotten, and excessively concerned with appearance. She diets, is appalled by sex, and only interested in money, shopping, and social status.³⁵ No matter how hard men try, the JAP cannot be pleased. There are many popular jokes that demonstrate these characteristics such as:

³⁴ Ravits, “The Jewish Mother,” 8-9.

³⁵ Dundes, “The J.A.P. and the J.A.M. In American Jokelore,” 461.

What is a JAP's favorite wine? "I wanna go to Hawaii."

How does a JAP commit suicide? Piles her clothes on top of the bed and jumps off.

What's a JAP's idea of natural childbirth? Going into the delivery room without any makeup on.

What is a JAP with a colostomy's greatest concern? Finding shoes to match the bag.

What is Jewish foreplay? Twenty minutes of begging.

Why do JAP's wear gold diaphragms? Because they like their men to come into money.³⁶

This unlikable character, Dundes claims, represents the curious combination of Jewish and American cultural traits that the second and third generation Jews adopted.

Unlike Ben-Amos, who claimed jokes told by younger Jewish generations redefined Jewish identity in the modern era, Dundes argues second and third generation Jews told JAP jokes to assure first generation Jews that the younger generations still considered themselves Jewish and believed in the social structure of the Jewish community. Jewish American princess jokes became vogue during the rise of the feminist movement and Jewish Orthodoxy in the late 1960s. During this time many Jews also began focusing on obtaining more material goods. These jokes personified the second and third generation's supposed need to rebel against both feminism and materialism. The Jewish American princess personified what many Jews feared: an over-emphasis on material goods and gender equality. These jokes ultimately tried to curtail any change in gender identity within the Jewish community by characterizing powerful females as annoying and absurd.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 462-63.

Collectively, these arguments demonstrate that Jews utilized humor for either one or a combination of reasons. Some used jokes as a defense mechanism that highlighted the comedian's concern about a particular person, group of people, or social or cultural issue. Comedy helped maintain an ethnic identity within a broad sociological structure such as the mixed population of the United States. Humor also became a tool used to define their identity among intergenerational Jewish-Americans or express tension within the Jewish community.

The satirical formula used within the nightclubs during the late 1950s and early 1960s fit with the Jewish tradition of self-criticism. Sahl and Bruce used critical humor, reminiscent of Jewish self-criticism, in their acts to highlight hypocrisies within American society. Whether they knowingly did this is up for debate, but a study of their work and their highly publicized downfalls from fame highlight how their humor did in fact portray an ethnic identity during the early post-war years.

On the surface Sahl's comedic style did not portray the various characteristics that personified Jewishness. Aside from his name, a casual observer watching his act in a club or reading about him in a newspaper or magazine would not know he was a Jew. He is not even American. Sahl was born in Montreal, but his comedic work focused on American foreign and domestic politics. Rarely did he mention religion on stage except to make an occasional biblical quip.³⁷ His act was straight-laced and peppered with hip language and a "neverending supply of phrases parodying academic jargon."³⁸ He did

³⁷ "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Mort Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, MG V-15021; Mort Sahl, *Look Forward in Anger*, Verve, MG V-15004; Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002; Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012; Mort Sahl, *A Way of Life*, Verve, MG V-15006.

³⁸ "Comedians: The Third Campaign," *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49.

not use the Yiddish jokes or phrases that the 1966 *Time* magazine reporter lovingly referred to as the “dark breed” or “black humor.” The reporter, clueless of Sahl’s background, even noted that he or she pined for a comedic revival of Sahl’s “robust” satire.³⁹ Printed interviews or profiles of the comedian never mentioned Sahl’s Jewish heritage, and the comic did not discuss growing up as a Jew or its influences on him personally or professionally in his autobiography.⁴⁰ His album entitled *The Next President*, a statement usually made when Sahl was brought on stage at a nightclub, was pressed in 1960. Sahl’s lack of outward Jewishness allowed nightclub owners and Verve record executives to freely call him a candidate for president of the United States during an era when many Americans harbored concerns about electing John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, as President.⁴¹

Sahl’s lifestyle reflected an abandonment of Jewish culture and a search for the “American dream.” Numerous publications including *Playboy*, *Time*, and the *New York Times* commented on the vast fortune he made during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During the height of his fame, Sahl roughly made \$7,500 for a week long stint at a club.⁴² Newspapers and magazines commented on his high rate of consumption of material goods which embodied a Jewish stereotype that stems back to the JAM and JAP’s concern for the pursuit of a higher class status and emphasis on materialism. Cultural historian Gerald Nachman wrote that Sahl was “the embodiment of what a new men’s

³⁹ “American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter,” *Time*, 4 March 1966, 46-47.

⁴⁰ Mort Sahl, *Heartland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

⁴¹ Mort Sahl, *The Next President*, Verve, MG V-15021.

⁴² Rolf Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy: The Egghead Humor of Mort Sahl,” *Playboy*, June 1957; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; “Spawning Ground of the Offbeat,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1961, 11. The hungry i still booked him for a “sentimental \$5,000.

magazine out of Chicago would soon refer to as ‘The *Playboy* Man.’”⁴³ Sahl lived a life of luxury. Besides literally living with large sums of money stacked around his home, he owned a vast collection of jazz records, two hi-fi stereos, fourteen radios, four television sets, a large collection of expensive watches, and three cars which, according to Nachman, was “all the fifties talismans of young American manhood.” He dated beautiful women within the entertainment industry including Gentile actresses Nancy Olsen, Haya Hayareet, and Phyllis Kirk, and later married a former *Playboy* playmate named China Lee.⁴⁴ Sahl also performed for President Harry Truman, wrote jokes for John F. Kennedy during the 1960 campaign, was friends with presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, and was regularly quoted in numerous media outlets.⁴⁵

By working hard, obtaining success, and enjoying the spoils of that success, Sahl personified the American standard of living many witnessed or tried to achieve during the post-war affluence. Scholars like Edward S. Shapiro, Marshall Sklar, and Joseph Greenblum would argue Sahl represented the ever-growing percentage of Jews who abandoned the Jewish faith and assimilated into American culture. Even academics like James D. Bloom, Sig Altman, and Stephen J. Whitfield may dismiss Sahl as a Jewish humorist because he was no outsider to American culture and the entertainment industry.

⁴³ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Backstage Books, 2004), 54.

⁴⁴ Rolf Malcolm, “A Real Fee-Form Guy: The Egghead Humor of Mort Sahl,” *Playboy*, June 1957; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 54, 75; Sahl, *Heartland*, 63-69; “Sahl’s Divorce Try,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 March 1978, 4.

⁴⁵ “City Salutes Truman a Day Early,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1959, 1; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Sahl, *Heartland*, 5, 80-81.

In contrast, Lenny Bruce relished in his Jewishness. He used Yiddish phrases like *shmuck*, *goyish*, and *tuchus* regularly in his performances.⁴⁶ In his autobiography he openly discussed the influence of the Jewish culture on him and American society at large, and constantly described his non-conventional family experiences including running away from home at the age of sixteen and later marrying an exotic dancer named Honey while embellishing his Jewish cultural traits and stereotypes in his writing.⁴⁷ Bruce embraced his Jewish heritage by wearing it on his sleeve. Yet both Sahl and Bruce had much in common. Both grew up with unhappy parents, served in the military, took advantage of the G.I. Bill, married young and divorced during their rise to fame, and started their careers by defying conventional wisdom and discussing controversial topics like drugs, sex, and politics while on stage.⁴⁸

For both of these comedians, the defiant nature and willingness to question authority within their comedy is what defines their ethnic identity and place in American culture. They exhibited the same comedic characteristics that Jews used to mock cultural biases and uphold Jewish identity in American society. Psychologist Samuel Janus noted that Jewish comedians are “‘overwhelmingly anxious’ people,” that use comedy as a defense against the aggression and hostility of others.⁴⁹ Traditionally Jewish comedians aimed their anxieties at themselves by using self-depreciative humor. This humor in turn

⁴⁶ Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 1, Fantasy, FCD-60-023; Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 2, Fantasy, FCD-60-024; Lenny Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, World Pacific, CDP7243 8 34020 2 1.

⁴⁷ Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

⁴⁸ Sahl, *Heartland*; Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*; “Comedians: The Third Campaign,” *Time*, 15 August 1960, 42-49; Gilbert Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

⁴⁹ “Analyzing Jewish Comics,” *Time*, 2 October 1978, 76.

became a shared trait in the Jewish community that served as a bonding agent amongst Jews while also assuring Gentile audiences that Jews were a non-threatening people. Sahl and Bruce used this same formula, but instead of aiming their anxieties at themselves they transferred their apprehensions toward a larger target: the American society as a whole.

During the Cold War era when anxieties were high, comedians like Sahl and Bruce used their craft to address the concerns many American felt on a daily basis. Sahl's producer, Jerry Wald, once said that he viewed the comedian as a "Happy Worrier" and a "voice of mankind in the atomic age." He claimed Sahl spoke for everyone when he noted that "he doesn't know whether the approaching unidentified aircraft is going to drop a hydrogen bomb or spell out Pepsi-Cola in skywriting."⁵⁰ Cold War anxieties ran deep during the early post-war years and for good reason. With McCarthyism, the Korean War, Sputnik, the Rosenbergs, the downed U2 plane in Russia, and countless other incidents that flooded the media, many Americans worried that the Cold War could erupt at any moment. Sahl used his humor to question the events of the day and, criticize "the lack of tolerance" by the American government.⁵¹

Sahl held reservations about many of the tactics used to try and subvert the perceived communist threat and the American public. When Joseph McCarthy called the United State Army a bastion for communism, Sahl joked that a part of the military-issued uniform called the "Eisenhower jacket" had been redesigned by adding a "flap that would

⁵⁰ Herbert Mitgang, "Anyway, Onward With Mort Sahl," *New York Times*, 8 February 1959, SM32.

⁵¹ Sahl, *Heartland*, 21.

go up over the mouth” and renamed the “McCarthy jacket.”⁵² He also satirized the government’s paranoia by claiming that “every time the Russians threw an American in jail, Nixon would throw an American in jail to make sure they didn’t get away with it.”⁵³

With his outspoken humor Sahl met some resistance from the general public. People would come to shows and call him a communist, and according to Sahl some patrons would wait outside the hungry i to “beat me up after work.”⁵⁴ Sahl viewed the overtly conservative decade as an overbearing force on public sentiment, and his humor conveyed his reservations about its unwillingness to openly discuss and accept different political and social viewpoints. His comedy conveyed his Jewishness because it mocked the Cold War politics that he perceived as threatening to the American citizenry. Sahl’s comedy was, according to Janus, “a defense mechanism to ward off the aggression and hostility” of the American government.⁵⁵

Bruce’s comedic style is easier to dissect. From the onset of his rise to fame, many considered Bruce a “sick” comedian who spoke openly about taboo subjects. *Playboy* noted that in a single performance Bruce found humor in “such sacred and profane subjects as religion, homosexuality, funeral homes, race relations, dope addiction, and matricide.”⁵⁶ The *New York Times* called him the “most scarifyingly funny proponent of the significance, all social and some political, to be found in a night club” in 1959.⁵⁷ The comedian’s material pushed the bounds of taste by questioning the

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Analyzing Jewish Comics,” *Time*, 2 October 1978, 76.

⁵⁶ Larry Siegel, “Rebel with a Caustic Cause,” *Playboy*, February 1959, 21, 66, 78.

⁵⁷ Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

social mores of the country and emphasizing the hypocrisy that many witnessed on a daily basis. He once stated “All of my humor is based upon destruction and despair.”⁵⁸ The comedian noted he would be out of work “If the whole world were tranquil, without disease and violence.”⁵⁹ Bruce once joked, in referencing the trial of a G.I. accused of shooting a Japanese woman, that the “Verdict has been change [sic] from life in prison to two weeks at Waldorf-Astoria”⁶⁰ In his famous routine entitled “How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties” the comic drew attention to numerous stereotypes associated with African-Americans by using them himself. He called a black man “boy” and other racial slurs, offered him watermelon and fried chicken, commented on African-American sexual deviation, and said “no matter what the hell a guy is, if he stays in his place he’s alright.”⁶¹ Bruce used humor to highlight the insecurities he felt about the conservative social climate of 1950s America.

Bruce knew that the reservations many Jews felt about American society emanated among the general American population. His insecurities—perhaps stemming from his Jewishness—cut across the boundaries of race and religion during the Cold War. In his autobiography he stated, “It doesn’t matter even if you’re Catholic; if you live in New York you’re Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you’re going to be goyish even if you’re Jewish.” Bruce went so far as to single-out particular races when he wrote “Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews.”⁶² Though he embellishes some stereotypes in his observation, Bruce is really

⁵⁸ “Lenny Bruce Dies--'Narcotics,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 August 1966.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Millstein, “Man, It’s Like Satire,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1959, SM28.

⁶¹ Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals*, Vol. 2.

⁶² Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 5.

noting that the Jewish influence in American life has seeped into other sectors of American society like the hip urban environment where various minorities and those who questioned social and political mores typically lived. In essence Bruce was noting that a Jewish ethnic identity had spread among many in American Society, and that both Jews and non-Jews harbored mistrust and uneasiness during the early part of the Cold War era.

This showed that Jewish humor resonated with much larger audience. Being Jewish helped comedians make their critiques about society because people associated them with satiric humor. This association made their humor less threatening to sympathetic audiences, but also made Sahl and Bruce easy targets during the Cold War era. Bruce spoke about taboo subjects and used language that conservative America did not approve of, but his outward Jewishness helped him retain his audience. Sahl, who did not project his Jewish background to the American public, became an easier object of ridicule and scorn. He did not frame his comedic criticisms as a Jew, which in some instances made his humor more threatening than Bruce.

Their Jewishness made their humor more effective, but their constant worrisome and insecure nature naturally turned some of these anxieties into obsessions. For Sahl and Bruce these fixations ultimately triggered their fall from the limelight. Audiences were only willing to agree and pay to hear about their worries as long as their criticisms remained relevant. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Sahl began questioning the accuracy of the Warren Report in his act. At times he had simply “taken the entire Warren Report on the stage, read parts to the audience verbatim, and joked from there.”⁶³ He believed that the murder of Kennedy was not the work of Lee Harvey

⁶³ Sahl, *Heartland*, 39.

Oswald. Sahl even assisted in investigative work with a New Orleans District Attorney named Jim Garrison.⁶⁴ He and Garrison claimed they had uncovered the truth behind the assassination, but no one took them seriously. Soon his popularity started to fade because the American public had moved beyond President Kennedy's murder, and his outspoken views on the assassination caused many club owners and friends to shun him.⁶⁵ By 1966 he had fallen from public view. *Time* magazine stated that Sahl "is as hard to find as an old Will Rogers routine."⁶⁶

By 1968 Sahl claimed Enrico Banducci, the owner of the hungry i nightclub, was "practically the only guy in America that will hire me."⁶⁷ During the late 1960s he was not making money, but he kept trying to probe deeper into the inconsistencies of the Warren Report's investigation. The subject consumed him so much that roughly half of his autobiography pertains to the assassination and his struggles to try and find answers.⁶⁸ Much of his writing and comedic work during this time typified paranoia. He stated that his "motivation in defending the honor of President Kennedy was not idealistic. I [Sahl] believed that the people who killed him would be coming for me fifteen minutes later."⁶⁹

A 1968 article printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented that Internal Revenue agents had locked the doors of the hungry i and were investigating the club's tax withholding assessment. This happened to be the same week Sahl was scheduled to perform at the club and he was "convinced the raid was a Government conspiracy." Sahl

⁶⁴ "Mort Sahl Tells of the 'Conspiracy,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 February 1968, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ "American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter," *Time*, 4 March 1966, 46-47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Sahl, *Heartland*, 89-158.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

stated, “You know what this is? It’s Nazi Germany 1936 . . .”⁷⁰ Soon Banducci grew tired of his antics too. One night while discussing the assassination on stage at the hungry i, Banducci turned the stage lights off and offered a refund to all the patrons. Sadly, the comedian and club owner did not talk to each other after the incident for fifteen years.⁷¹ Sahl’s worries about the assassination stemmed from his ethnic background, but he took his critiques too far. Many Americans questioned the inconsistencies of the Warren Report, but Sahl lost sight of the satirical humor which allowed an open platform for such discussion.

Bruce was also not immune to such obsessive behavior. He became famous as “the man who made the four-letter word a popular mixer.”⁷² The comedian was notorious for his arrests and four public obscenity trials in states across the country. According to some attorneys his use of language and taboo subjects on stage pushed the

⁷⁰ “Mort Sahl Tells of the ‘Conspiracy,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 February 1968, 3.

⁷¹ Thomas A. Cohen, *hungry i Reunion* (Long Beach, NJ: hungry i Productions, 1980).

⁷² “American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter,” *Time*, 4 March 1966, 46-47.

bounds of obscenity laws.⁷³ The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that his “words of the vernacular that deal with the human body and its function—can be used to promote love, by some—and hate, by other people.”⁷⁴ Bruce once joked that policemen would attend his shows, report what he said to a grand jury the next morning, and then arrest him because a policeman performed his show poorly.⁷⁵ The comedian argued that the lawmen who arrested him did not understand the context in which he used the language, and that most of the language he utilized was “uttered often by characters he impersonates.”⁷⁶

⁷³ “Bruce Gets by the Cops With His First Show,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 March 1963, 16; Michael Harris, “Bad Day in Court for Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 March 1962, 1, 3; “No Laughs in Court for Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 January 1962, 2; “The Law and Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 August 1964, 37; “Bruce vs. the Cops Again,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 March 1963, 11; “Lenny Bruce Sentenced---Year in Jail,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 March 1963, 1, 18; “Hung Jury,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 February 1963, 16; “Lenny Bruce in Trouble--Again,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 February 1963, 38; “Lenny Bruce Held for Obscenity,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 October 1962, 22; Michael Harris, “Lenny Bruce Cleared,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 March 1962, 1; “Lenny Bruce Cleared in Obscenity Trial,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 July 1963, 4; “Lenny Bruce Arrested,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 May 1963, 24; “Judge Hits Police Action on Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 May 1963, 10; “Lenny Bruce Ruling---Not Obscene,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 July 1964, 41; “Lenny Bruce Asks Ruling on Obscenity,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 June 1964, 29; “Lenny Bruce Asks for Court Help,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 October 1965, 45; “Lenny Bruce Loses Suit,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 May 1965, 31; Michael Harris, “Lenny Bruce on the Stand---and Says He Said It,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 March 1962, 4; Michael Harris, “Lenny Bombs in Court Scene,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 November 1961, 3; Jonathan Root, “A Crusade On Hypocrisy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 August 1966; Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002).

⁷⁴ “The Law and Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 August 1964, 37.

⁷⁵ Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (Port Washington, NY: Columbus Productions Inc., 1966).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

During the later stages of his career Bruce immersed himself in his legal battles. He researched the law and conducted courtroom battles with his own lawyers and the prosecuting attorneys. By 1963, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that Bruce “seems to have retreated into a strange and almost-private world of judges, lawyers, district attorneys, policemen, court room decisions and briefs.”⁷⁷ Toward the end of his career, after a performance, Bruce usually raced toward the exit and holed himself up in a room to study a recording of newly finished set.⁷⁸ His obsession even transferred onto the stage. Bruce spent much of his Carnegie Hall performance discussing the subtle intricacies of language and law when he could have simply relished in performing at the famed concert hall.⁷⁹ The *San Francisco Chronicle* even commented that Bruce’s shows were “not often funny” by 1963 because “He has taken to talking in public more and more about his legal difficulties, and the psychology of the law.”⁸⁰ His critical nature backfired on him, and he too forgot that his critiques needed humor and political relevance to resonate with his audiences.

What Sahl and Bruce’s careers indicate is that they both used a time-tested Jewish defense mechanism to show their concern for the American political and social environment during the late 1950s and early 1960s, but they abandoned comedy once they perceived Americans as complacent during the 1960s. A 1976 *San Francisco Chronicle* article summed up the realities of Sahl and Bruce’s actions: “Critics have noted that Sahl had as much an obsession with the assassination of President Kennedy as

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Bruce, *The Carnegie Hall Concert*.

⁸⁰ “The Law and Lenny Bruce,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 August 1964, 37.

Lenny Bruce had with the legalities of his obscenity arrests—with the same negative effect on his audience.”⁸¹ These two comedians both reached high peaks and low valleys during their career, but they personified a Jewish ethnic identity through the early stages of their careers.

Many consider Jews and their humor as outside the mainstream of American culture. Sahl, Bruce, and other stand-up comics during the early Cold War years performed for the outsiders of conservative society such as the beatniks and American youth. In their humor they exhibited a defensiveness and critical ideal about American politics and culture that they borrowed from their Jewish upbringing. As Jews struggled to fit into Cold War America while also attempting to retain an ethnic identity, they used humor to further their status as cultural outsiders to the American public at large. As outsiders they freely discussed and criticized Cold War fears and society. Jewish-influenced humor thus supported a cultural agenda by easing tension between Jews and American society and establishing a distinctive element of Jewish culture while it also created a new form of stand-up comedy that critiqued mainstream society.

Sahl and Bruce’s humor, celebrity status, and highly publicized descent from fame helped solidify Jewish ethnicity amongst the American citizenry during a time when many Jews grappled with their ethnic status in American society. They simply used Jewish self-criticism to criticize Cold War policy. Their criticisms went too far, and their time in the limelight ended prematurely. Sahl never regained the height of fame he once held, but he still sporadically performs in the San Francisco area today. Bruce slowly

⁸¹ Blake Green, “Mort Sahl,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 November 1976, 17.

sunk into a dark world of drug addiction that ended his life on August 3, 1966.⁸² Many contend that his legal troubles pushed him toward narcotics. According to Janus, “the [Jewish] comedians are bright, sensitive and relatively stable,” but “they are not happy guys.”⁸³ By the mid 1960s Sahl and Bruce forgot about the humor and focused heavily on their own personal demons. Comedian Abe Burrows once said that “the comedian must practice his comedy in order to avoid destroying himself.”⁸⁴ If only they had heeded Burrows advice they may have not fallen so hard from grace.

⁸²“There was Thought in His Rages,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1999, AR27; Judy Stone, “Carlin: Lenny Bruce was His Idol,” *New York Times*, 28 May 1967, D13.

⁸³ “Analyzing Jewish Comics,” *Time*, 2 October 1978, 76.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Roughly nine months after Lenny Bruce's death, the *New York Times* printed an article about George Carlin and his evolution from a vaudeville-inspired comedian to a comic that Carlin believed was a "spokesman for people against authority," who adhered to "certain attitudes toward The Establishment, bureaucracy and small-mindedness."

According to the article Carlin and his comedy partner, Jack Burns, initially caught the interest of Mort Sahl and Bruce and both encouraged them to pursue a career in comedy. Carlin and Burns later went their separate ways, but not before Bruce found an agent for the duo. About fifteen years later, during the mid-'70s, Carlin's career started skyrocketing as he toured college campuses and broadcast his uncensored specials on a newly formed cable network called HBO. Through this new medium he became one of the best known and well respected comics in the business, but in 1967 he gave credit to Bruce for his own comedic rebirth. Carlin called the late comedian his idol and noted "Lenny's perception was magnificent . . . [and] . . . What Lenny was saying," about the political and cultural direction of the country, "should continue to be said until we begin to hear some of it."¹

There are an endless number of comedians who were inspired by Lenny Bruce's material and willingness to fight the police, press, and church who "systematically harassed" him, including such outspoken comics as Carlin, Richard Pryor, Jon Stewart, Margaret Cho, and Dennis Leary.² Both Sahl and Bruce ushered in a new style of comedic commentary that seemed "sick" during the early post-war years. Today,

¹ Judy Stone, "Carlin: Lenny Bruce was His Idol," *New York Times*, 28 May 1967, D13.

²"There was Thought in His Rages," *New York Times*, 8 August 1999, AR27; Stone, "Carlin: Lenny Bruce was His Idol," *New York Times*, 28 May 1967, D13.

audiences almost expect to be shocked by a comedian's routine. The reason for such a mentality is Sahl and Bruce's pioneering of a new comedic frontier, the success of comedians they influenced, and new mediums like cable television and the internet which limit censorship. There will always some Americans ready to pay attention to comedians commenting on mainstream society, and with new technology comics get their best material to their audience in an unaltered form. Robert B. Weide, the director of a 1968 Academy Award-nominated documentary about Bruce, agreed about censorship and technology when he joked that "if there had been an HBO when Lenny was alive, he might still be around today"³

On the other hand, the debate about the role of humor in Jewish culture still rages. *New York* magazine recently published an article entitled "Twilight of the Tumblers" which claims Woody Allen and co-creator of the hit television series *Seinfeld*, Larry David, are a dying breed of comedic Jewish writers. Reporter Mark Harris essentially makes the same claim that other scholars have previously made, "[Jewish] humor is vanishing, the reason may be that it emerged from a combination of pain and pride that now seems more historical than contemporary." Harris believes Jews have assimilated into mainstream society, and that the "excluded outsider" or "neurotic, depressive, abrasive" humor no longer exists among younger Jewish comedians.⁴ Though a semblance of truth may exist in Harris' theory, it seems comedy is still tied to Jewishness as both a signpost for ethnicity and a tool for criticism of American society.

The comedians who started performing in early 1950s nightclubs like the hungry i connected with their audience in a way performers had never done before. Their acts

³ "There was Thought in His Rages," *New York Times*, 8 August 1999, AR27.

⁴ Mark Harris, "Twilight of the Tumblers," *New York*, 1 June 2009, 32-35, 39, 84-85.

focused on socially conscious material, and their outsider humor resonated with a small section of mainstream America such as the beatniks and the country's youth which had grown weary of the Eisenhower decade. As outsiders, who strayed away from vaudevillian norms, they freely spoke about political, social, and cultural issues they deemed important, and used the nightclub as a place to discuss their fears and criticisms. In the process, Sahl and Bruce's outsider mentality also helped maintain an ethnic identity by keeping the tradition of self-critical humor alive while also posturing as critical spokesmen of mainstream America and Cold War policy.

By performing their humor in smaller nightclubs, the environment and the comedian's hip and intellectual personas helped the comics connect with various rebellious factions while also demonstrating that the comedian's outsider status allowed them to become critics of mainstream culture and project a Jewish identity during a time that Jewishness was highly contested. As a whole this form of cultural criticism is overlooked in contemporary histories. The history of stand-up comedy during the 1950s intimately connected with other culturally critical movements during the decade that later became synonymous with the social unrest during the 1960s.

Nevertheless, Sahl and Bruce's careers ushered in a form of highly critical comedy that has influenced numerous generations of comedians. Their comedy reflected the political and cultural tribulations that America witnessed during the early post-war years, and historically their humor became a relevant tool in questioning and criticizing American policy. In the words of Mort Sahl, "I now encourage you to break off into

buzz groups and discuss the real meaning of the material. We'll call it a day. Thank you one and all.”⁵

⁵ Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS 615012.

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