



Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s

Gerald Nachman

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The comedians of the 1950s and 1960s were a totally different breed of relevant, revolutionary performer from any that came before or after, comics whose humor did much more than pry guffaws out of audiences. Gerald Nachman presents the stories of the groundbreaking comedy stars of those years, each one a cultural harbinger:

- Mort Sahl, of a new political cynicism
- Lenny Bruce, of the sexual, drug, and language revolution
- Dick Gregory, of racial unrest
- Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge, of racial harmony
- Phyllis Diller, of housewifely complaint
- Mike Nichols & Elaine May and Woody Allen, of self-analytical angst and a rearrangement of male-female relations
- Stan Freberg and Bob Newhart, of encroaching, pervasive pop media manipulation and, in the case of Bob Elliott & Ray Goulding, of the banalities of broadcasting
- Mel Brooks, of the Yiddishization of American comedy
- Sid Caesar, of a new awareness of the satirical possibilities of television
- Joan Rivers, of the obsessive craving for celebrity gossip and of a latent bitchy sensibility
- Tom Lehrer, of the inane, hypocritical, mawkishly sentimental nature of hallowed American folkways and, in the case of the Smothers Brothers, of overly revered folk songs and folklore
- Steve Allen, of the late-night talk show as a force in American comedy
- David Frye and Vaughn Meader, of the merger of showbiz and politics and, along with Will Jordan, of stretching the boundaries of mimicry
- Shelley Berman, of a generation of obsessively self-confessional humor
- Jonathan Winters and Jean Shepherd, of the daring new free-form improvisational comedy and of a sardonically updated view of Midwestern archetypes
- Ernie Kovacs, of surreal visual effects and the unbounded vistas of video

Taken together, they made up the faculty of a new school of vigorous, socially aware satire, a vibrant group of voices that reigned from approximately 1953 to 1965.

Nachman shines a flashlight into the corners of these comedians' chaotic and often troubled lives, illuminating their genius as well as their demons, damaged souls, and desperate drive. His exhaustive research and intimate interviews reveal characters that are intriguing and all too human, full of rich stories, confessions, regrets, and traumas. *Seriously Funny* is at once a dazzling cultural history and a joyous celebration of an extraordinary era in American comedy.

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