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Comedy
at the Edge

How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America

Richard Zoglin

2008

BLOOMSBURY

joke. On his album *A Star Is Bought*, Brooks takes a phone call from a psychiatrist on a radio call-in show:

"I'd like to ask you one question. Are you still trying to show Mother something?"

"Show Mother what?"

"Do you still feel that you can buy your friends with laughter?"

"Let me tell you something, Doctor. I don't have to buy my friends with anything. I don't need friends. I shouldn't have friends. You can't go into this business and expect friends. I am a loner. I must be a loner. That's what an artist is."

"You don't believe that."

"You're damn right I don't believe that. Help me, man, I'm sick!"

Bruce, the original sick comic, would have liked that. He might not have recognized some of the new incarnations that stand-up comedy took in the decade that followed his death. But he would have at least had a measure of satisfaction, had he been able to stick around, in seeing the revolution he started.

CHAPTER 2

Rebellion

There are no bad words. Bad thoughts. Bad intentions. And woooords.

—George Carlin

Lenny Bruce never played the Copacabana; the swank Manhattan nightclub wasn't his kind of place. It wasn't George Carlin's kind of place either. But in December 1969, Carlin was appearing there under protest, and using it to kiss off old-time comedy.

By the late '60s the Copa was one of the last outposts of a fast-disappearing show business era, a posh room where well-heeled couples in fancy evening dress sat in red-leather banquettes and watched sophisticated entertainers like Tony Bennett and Peggy Lee. Jules Podell, the imposing, corpulent, reputedly Mob-connected boss of the Copa, ran the place with an iron hand. If a table of customers got rowdy, a cadre of uniformed waiters would march over, pick up their table, and simply carry it briskly out of the room, leaving the group to sit there exposed or slink away in shame. "The mirrors are always clean at the Copa," Podell liked to say.

Podell was wary of George Carlin. The hot young comic had played the club once before, but now Podell was hearing about his racy new material, which had just gotten him thrown out of the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. Podell called up Irvin Arthur, the agent who handled nightclub bookings at General Artists Corporation (GAC), the talent agency that represented Carlin, and made him promise that Carlin would behave himself. No jokes about religion or fags, Podell insisted, and no making fun of the club. Arthur told him not to worry.

So Podell went ahead with the scheduled two-week engagement. But Carlin wasn't in the mood to cooperate. He was trying very consciously to

change his act, reaching out to a younger, hipper crowd, and he told his agents they ought to be booking him in coffeehouses and colleges, not ritzy, old-fashioned nightclubs like the Copa. "I was straining at the leash," says Carlin. "I knew I didn't belong in that place."

Indeed, Carlin's new material—about drugs and sex and the Vietnam War—didn't go over very well with the staid crowd at the Copa. Just to show how bored he was, Carlin took to reading from the yellow pages onstage or crawling underneath the piano and reciting from the manufacturing sticker. "I don't belong here," he would blurt out in exasperation. "These places went out of style twenty years ago. I see Don Ameche dance past me one more time, I'm getting the fuck out of here."

Craig Kellem, Carlin's chief agent at GAC, came in one night with some of the gang from the agency. All dressed in dark suits, sitting together at what they liked to call the "penguin table," they wanted to see for themselves the comedian who was reportedly flipping out onstage. Kellem adored Carlin. When he was a junior agent, Kellem had taken him on as his first client because no one else at the agency was paying him much attention, and had worked hard to build his career. Now Carlin seemed to be putting all that at risk.

"He comes out and he does about thirty minutes," Kellem recalls. "Then it starts to get hairy. He was pushing it. Tiptoeing over the line. Tiptoeing a lot over the line. I began to hear animal sounds in the room. I turn around and there's Jules Podell at the back of the room, talking to himself, making these guttural noises. He's knocking his ring against the table. He's livid. I'm sitting there watching my adored client, who has promised to be good, trying to compete with these animal sounds coming from the owner of the club. It was disturbing, to say the least."

For Carlin it was liberating. The Copa let him play out his engagement but at the end of his last show gave him a pointed send-off. "It was very artistic, very cinematic," Carlin recalls. "Toward the end of my act, they slowly turned my light off. Instead of the usual thing where the band plays you off, they just brought the light down slowly. And they took the sound down at the same time. Very dramatic. It was almost sweet in a way. And I knew I was free."

George Carlin's career transformation was the defining event of the stand-up comedy revolution that began in the late '60s. He had already established a successful career as a sharp-witted, short-haired comedian who did parodies of commercials and radio DJs and a spaced-out "Hippy-Dippy Weatherman." But as the peace-and-love era blossomed and campus protests mounted, Carlin looked around and decided he was on the

wrong side of the generation gap: a thirty-year-old comedian entertaining people in their forties but whose head—helped by quantities of pot and hallucinogens—was with the twenty-year-olds. So he set out to reinvent himself. He let his hair and beard grow, traded in his skinny ties for tie-dyed T-shirts, and began doing comedy that expressed the new, antiestablishment spirit of the counterculture.

He didn't have it easy. The pooh-bahs of showbiz were wary of him—skittish about his new material, cynical about his motives. The younger crowd, too, had to be convinced that this straight-arrow comic whom they knew from *The Ed Sullivan Show* wasn't just an opportunist, cashing in on the hippie fad. And Carlin himself had to come to terms with a career twist that wasn't in the cards when he was plotting out his future as a kid in New York's "white Harlem," figuring that he'd use stand-up as a springboard to a career as a movie comic, like his idol Danny Kaye.

Now Carlin had a new role model: Lenny Bruce, whom he had listened to, seen perform, and met a handful of times before his death in 1966. He channeled Bruce's insurrectionist spirit, his campaign against the hypocrisy and distorted values of white middle-class society, and made it resonate with a new generation—not the beat-era hipsters who were Bruce's chief audience, but the baby boom kids who were protesting the Vietnam War, dropping acid, and listening to the Rolling Stones. If he weathered the crusade a lot better than Bruce did, it was partly because Bruce had already taken most of the heat, but also because Carlin was temperamentally better prepared for it. He was disciplined about his work, a compulsive student of his own career who kept a detailed log of every gig he did (a log that gets spotty only in the years when his cocaine habit spun out of control). In a world of Friars Club conviviality, he was a something of a loner, mixing little with the comedy fraternity or Hollywood's social circles. But his ornery integrity drew admiration, almost veneration, even from the people he left behind along the way. "I'm not sure at the time I appreciated what he wanted to do," says Kellem, the agent Carlin dropped not long after that gig at the Copa. "But he was fighting the good fight. He was incredibly brave and true to himself. And in retrospect, he was right."

Like many heroes of the '60s youth revolution, Carlin was born a little earlier than most of his future fans—on May 12, 1937, near the end of the Depression, in a white enclave near Harlem called Morningside Heights. His father, an ad salesman, was a drinker prone to violent outbursts, and when George was only two, his mother grabbed him and his older brother, fled down the fire escape, and left for good.

Mary Carlin and her boys spent two years shuttling among friends and

relatives before finally getting an apartment of their own—with George's father stalking them all the way. "He hounded her," says Carlin. "And he frightened her. When we lived on One Hundred Fortieth Street, we would come back from downtown, get off the subway, and the procedure was, my mother would go to the call box, get the local precinct, and say, 'Hi, it's Mary and the kids. I'm at One Hundred Forty-fifth Street. Come and get us.' And they would drive us home and see us into the house. Sometimes he'd be across the street, just looking." Even when they finally moved into an apartment that his father didn't know the whereabouts of, his mother was still on edge. If they got an unexpected knock, she'd tell George to peek under the door. If he saw a lady's shoes, he could open it. A man's shoes, and they would stay quiet until the visitor went away. This family drama ended only when his father died. George was eight.

His mother had a business school degree and worked as an executive assistant in publishing and advertising, leaving George to spend a lot of time on his own. "Inside, you're saying, 'Where the fuck is everybody?' " says Carlin. "I developed a very strong left brain, to cover my pain and my feelings. I thought, instead of felt. I was alone a lot, and I interpreted it as independence, autonomy, and freedom. I made a life out of it for myself."

Show business was a big part of it from the start. When he was five, his mom taught him to wiggle his hips and imitate Mae West. At eight or nine, he would get on the subway by himself and ride downtown to the big movie palaces on Forty-second Street, where he would hang out and try to get autographs from stars of the stage shows (Danny Kaye on a good day; Durward Kirby on a bad one). When he graduated from eighth grade, his mom gave him a reel-to-reel recorder, and he began taping himself doing parodies of newscasts and sports reports. It was juvenile stuff, but the old recordings show a kid who was already developing his talent for vocal parody:

Stay tuned for Brooklyn Dodgers baseball.

(*Tongue click—crack of the bat. Sharp exhale of breath—the crowd roars.*)

Roy Campanella wins the ballgame!

Carlin inherited his Irish Catholic family's conservative politics and love of language (his grandfather was a policeman who, Carlin says, once

copied all the works of Shakespeare in longhand), but he rebelled against his mother's aspirations for him. Instead of going "up the hill," to the nearby bastions of higher learning like Columbia University, he hung out "down the hill," with the kids in his racially mixed neighborhood—smoking pot and generally causing trouble. He went to a relatively enlightened Catholic elementary school, with no grades and no corporal punishment. But in ninth grade he switched to Cardinal Hayes High School, where he got a heavy dose of Catholic discipline. After trying without success to get into the High School for the Performing Arts, he transferred to a public high school in Washington Heights. At age sixteen he dropped out altogether, and a year later joined the Air Force.

Carlin's left brain had already come up with a career plan: he would do his stint in the military, then use the G.I. Bill to go to school to become a DJ, and parlay that into a career in stand-up comedy and ultimately the movies. And things began to happen faster than he could have imagined. Stationed near Shreveport, Louisiana, where he repaired electronic systems on B-47s, Carlin met the town's most popular DJ while acting in a local production of *Golden Boy*. Carlin asked if he could come down to the radio station sometime and watch. The DJ, it turned out, was also the station's owner, and he hired Carlin as a news reader for sixty cents an hour. Before long Carlin was hosting a noontime soft-music hour, then an afternoon drive-time show, *Carlin's Corner*, where he played rock 'n' roll. He became something of a personality in town: "My picture was all over; I could go out to the bars at night and say to a girl, 'Listen, would you like me to play a record for you tomorrow?' It was a nice come-on. I was in clover."

At the Air Force base, though, Carlin was mostly in trouble—talking back to officers, sneaking off when he was supposed to be on guard duty. "I was a fuckup," he says. "I did not like arbitrary authority. I had three court marshals ultimately. No time in the stockade, but I lost rank in a lot of ways. They said, 'Why don't you just get fuckin' snaps on those stripes, George?' " Sometimes trouble just seemed to find him. Once he hitched a ride with a black soldier into town, and they got stopped by a couple of redneck cops, who roused them and threw them in jail for the night. Carlin had two joints stuffed in his socks, but the cops didn't find them, so he simply toked up overnight and blew the smoke out his cell window.

Carlin's Air Force career ended a year early when he was discharged as part of an Eisenhower-backed effort to downsize the military. He was still only twenty, but with some radio experience under his belt, he landed a job at WEZE in Boston, an easy-listening NBC affiliate. There he made

friends with a news reporter named Jack Burns. Like Carlin, Burns was an Irish Catholic who had served in the military. Unlike Carlin, he was a political liberal, who had interviewed Fidel Castro when the Cuban revolutionary visited Boston, and even traveled to Cuba on Castro's invitation. Burns opened Carlin's eyes politically.

"At that time George was fairly conservative," says Burns. "I always had a progressive agenda. I thought it was the duty of an artist to fight bigotry and intolerance. We had long, interesting conversations, good political discussions." "I kind of learned my politics and liberalism from him," Carlin acknowledges. "My mother was part of the Joe McCarthy, Westbrook Pegler, William Randolph Hearst, Francis Cardinal Spellman axis of conservative Catholicism. I was probably more a centrist. But when I watched the Army-McCarthy hearings, I probably rooted for his side. I bought all that because I didn't hear a coherent counterargument anywhere."

In Boston, however, Carlin was a nonideological troublemaker. One Sunday night he was manning the station during the weekly rosary broadcast by Richard Cardinal Cushing, the formidable head of the Boston archdiocese. The live sermon was supposed to last for fifteen minutes, but Cushing gave a windy preamble, and as the rosary droned on, Carlin saw that it was going to cut into the network news at the top of the hour. He knew that if the newscast were preempted, the station would lose ad revenue: "I cut him off, in the middle of the Hail Mary, and I put on Alka-Seltzer. Within a minute, the phone rings, and it was the cardinal. He says, 'I'd like to talk to the young man who took off the holy word of God!' "

Carlin got a pass from his bosses on that one. They weren't so forgiving a few weeks later when Carlin absconded with the station's mobile news van for a weekend jaunt to buy some pot in New York City. That same weekend, there was a prison break at the state penitentiary in Walpole, Massachusetts, and the station had to track him down at his mother's apartment to locate the news van. Carlin wasn't exactly remorseful. Prison breaks were happening with some regularity up at Walpole, he pointed out: "Why don't you just cover the next one?" The station fired him.

Carlin next wound up at KXOL in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was doing an evening show when Burns, his old Boston pal, showed up in a battered car with bald tires on his way out to Hollywood. Carlin convinced him to stay and take a job in the station's newsroom. The two began noodling with comedy bits in their spare time—"vulgar, vile things, but they were funny," says Carlin—and performing them in a local coffeehouse. Then they decided to throw all their belongings into Carlin's new

Dodge Dart and drive to L.A. to see if they could make it as a comedy team.

They got a room together and put a stash of $300 in the sock drawer as insurance, so they wouldn't have to take jobs parking cars or washing dishes. After a few days somebody stole the $300 and they were pounding the pavement. They stumbled on an opening for a morning DJ team at KDAY, a daytime-only 50,000-watt station, and were soon back in radio, working on their comedy bits together in the studio after hours. After a few months they were performing for $125 a week at Cosmo Alley, a coffeehouse in downtown Hollywood.

It was 1960, at the tail end of the beat era, and Burns and Carlin modeled themselves after the new-wave comedians like Bruce and Mort Sahl and Nichols and May. "We were aiming toward people who were sort of hip," says Carlin. "We wanted to be smart and up-to-date and like the comedians we admired who were in the new wave. We aspired to be Blue Angel comedians, which is where Nichols and May played in New York." Carlin did an impression of Jack Kennedy, as well as sharp ones of Sahl and Bruce, and played a character named Herb Coolhouse, a beat poet being interviewed by Burns ("You know, I think we ought to recognize Red China—they grow some groovy stuff over there"). In one of their more outrageous bits, they played Captain Jack and Jolly George, a pair of children's TV hosts who urge the tykes watching to "hide the booze before Mommy gets home" and send away for a "home junkie kit," complete with heroin, hypodermic needle, and bent spoon. "So irresponsible," Burns says now.

Murray Becker, who worked for a music publisher in the same building as the radio station, heard the team rehearsing one night and said he'd try to get his old Navy buddy Lenny Bruce to come see them. Sure enough, Bruce walked into Cosmo Alley one night and, perhaps flattered by Carlin's impression of him, recommended the team to his agents at GAC (which later morphed into International Creative Management). A couple of days later a telegram arrived: "GAC authorizes West Coast office to sign Burns and Carlin in all fields based on Lenny Bruce's recommendation."

Soon they were getting gigs at hip nightclubs like the hungry i, the San Francisco club that had provided an important early showcase for Bruce, Sahl, and other comics. Hugh Hefner saw their act in Chicago and booked them into his Playboy Club. (Hefner, an early champion of Bruce and patron of hip comedy, even helped market the team's first album, *At the Playboy Club Tonight, Burns and Carlin*—lending the club's name to the title even though the record was taped at Cosmo Alley.) They landed a guest shot on

Jack Paar's *Tonight Show*, with Arlene Francis filling in as host. Carlin's head was spinning: less than a year earlier he and Burns had been in an apartment in Texas, watching Paar on TV and fantasizing about being guests. ("How did you guys get together?" "Well, I was fucking Jack's mother . . .") "That was roughly January of 1960," says Carlin. "In October of that year we were *on* the show. I still don't believe it—that's how fast the journey was."

But the Paar spot didn't do a lot for them, and Burns and Carlin spent much of the next year trudging through dreary road dates, doing small-time clubs and one-nighters for groups like the Ford Dealers of Westchester County. Their best bits sometimes came offstage. Once, on a stop in Dallas, Carlin went to pick up their shirts at the laundry and was greeted by a team of armed cops. In one of the shirt pockets, someone had found a newspaper clipping about two men holding up an automobile club. (On the other side was an article about the European Common Market that Burns had clipped.) Both Burns and Carlin were hauled down to the station for questioning. "We play clubs," Burns pleaded. "Ever played this here auto club?" a detective shot back. When they read further down into the article and discovered that the suspects were black, the cops let the pair go. And offered them a lift to the club.

In March 1962, after two years together, Burns and Carlin split up. Both knew it was time. "We had lost some of the inventiveness and creative drive," says Carlin. Burns, in retrospect, felt the team had a basic flaw from the outset: "Most comedy teams are opposites, but George and I were pretty much the same person, two Irish Catholic guys." What's more, they had different career goals: Carlin wanted to do solo stand-up, while Burns thought of himself as an actor and a sketch comic. After the breakup, Burns joined Chicago's Second City improv troupe and later teamed up with Avery Schreiber in a more successful comedy duo.

Meanwhile, Carlin struggled. He adapted some of the old Burns and Carlin bits for his solo act and played dates that had already been booked for the team. He got some good reviews ("Deft, knowing and perceptive [with] an endless fount of new and fresh material," wrote Gene Knight in the *New York Journal-American* of Carlin's gig at the Living Room). But there were also plenty of dispiriting nights at Eagle and Moose lodges in the Midwest, where he got few laughs and learned, the hard way, one of his cardinal rules of comedy: Don't ever be standing on the same level as the tables.

He had gotten married in June 1961 to Brenda Hosbrook, whom he met while appearing at a club in Dayton, Ohio, where she was hostessing.

(Lenny Bruce also worked there, and Brenda had got to know him, driving him to the airport when he needed to pick up certain "packages.") When there were gaps between work, they would stay with Brenda's parents in Dayton or with George's mother in Morningside Heights. Then, after a year on the road and with a new baby daughter, Kelly, they rented an apartment in the building where George's mom lived and decided to see if he could make it in New York.

Carlin went down to Greenwich Village and picked up what work he could at folk clubs like the Bitter End and the Café Wha?. He became something of a regular at the Cafe au Go Go—a jazz club on Bleecker Street, where he would go into the back stairwell to smoke pot with another young comic who had just blown into town, Richard Pryor. The two didn't become close friends, but they watched each other as their careers began to move on parallel tracks. Each worked up a calling-card routine to get the attention of bookers for *The Merv Griffin Show*, which was known for being hospitable to new comedians and was easier to break into than *The Tonight Show*. Each got booked on the show in the summer of 1965: Pryor first, with his Rumpelstiltskin routine; Carlin a few weeks later, with a bit he called "The Indian Sergeant."

Carlin's routine sounds fairly tame and conventional today, but it got laughs and it showed off his knack for pop culture parody. The premise: western movies spend lots of time showing us how the cowboys get ready for an attack, but we never see how the Indians prepare. Carlin then becomes the battle-hardened, New York–accented Indian sergeant, trying to whip the troops into shape:

> All right, tall guys over by the trees, fat guys down behind the rocks—you with the beads, outta line . . . There'll be a massacre tonight at nine o'clock. We'll meet down by the bonfire, dance around a little, and move out. This will be the fourth straight night we've attacked the fort. However, tonight it will not be as easy. Tonight there *will be soldiers in the fort.*

The bit scored, and Griffin asked Carlin back for three more shows. Which was a problem, since Carlin didn't have three more routines polished and ready to go. So he suggested to the show's producer that Griffin say he liked "The Indian Sergeant" so much, could Carlin do it over again? Griffin obliged—then Carlin got offered another thirteen-show commitment and really had to scramble. "George and I would get together and he'd say, 'I got nothing,' " remembers Bob Golden, the former house pianist at the Cafe au

Go Go who became Carlin's first manager. "So we would grind out new stuff. Sometimes he'd literally be performing it for the first time on *Merv*." Carlin helped himself out by working up parodies of TV newscasts—which he could constantly update with new material from the headlines and read from a script onstage. "I could write the same day or the day before, and I didn't have to memorize it or test it out," Carlin says. "It gave me confidence. I didn't have to be nervous all day."

Griffin's show led to other TV guest shots, and in the summer of 1966 Carlin joined Pryor as a regular on *The Kraft Summer Music Hall*, a featherweight hour of song and comedy that was a summer replacement for *The Andy Williams Show*. Carlin looked out of place amid the Pepsodent-bright singer-dancers and Ken doll host, John Davidson. (Pryor, who could sing and dance a little, at least looked more at ease in the musical numbers.) But it enabled Carlin to showcase his popular early bits, like the Hippy-Dippy Weatherman Al Sleet, foggily trying to read the radar and distinguish the Canadian lows from the Mexican highs, and a spin-off character he created for the show, Al Pouch, the Hippy-Dippy Postman.

The logical next step for Carlin was *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Though on the downward slope of its twenty-three-year CBS run, Sullivan's Sunday-night variety show was still the premier TV venue for stand-up comedy. ("Johnny Carson gave you the big cities," Joan Rivers liked to say. "Sullivan gave you the country.") But Sullivan had a reputation for being rough on comedians. He would typically watch their act for the first time at a Sunday-afternoon dress rehearsal, in front of a studio audience. If he didn't like their material, he might cut back their time—or even dump them from the show altogether. Even established comics could have a tough time in these run-throughs; Sullivan rarely laughed at anything, and his stone face seemed to cast a pall over the whole audience. Moreover, Sullivan was growing increasingly inscrutable with age. A lot of material seemed to go over his head. Some of the agents and managers—who would gather in a room with the CBS censors on show night and laugh at Ed's gaffes and memory lapses—thought he was going senile.

Sullivan's people began making inquiries about Carlin, but he wanted to hold off doing the show. "I said, I'm new, and they're famous for chewing up young comedians, coming to you a few minutes before you're scheduled and saying, 'The chimpanzees went long; you have to cut two minutes.' I said, I'm not going there until I'm more in a position of strength. Until I can kind of ask for and expect a certain amount of time, and they'll respect that." When he finally was booked on the show, in January 1967, Carlin got a full seven minutes. Still, he had to endure Sullivan's wooden-Indian

stare at dress rehearsal, and afterward Golden got a call that Sullivan wanted to see him. Ushered into his presence, Golden sat nervously as Sullivan opened the conversation: "He says, 'George Carlin. He's Irish American, isn't he?' I say, 'Yes, he is.' And he says, 'Well, that's fine.' That was it. I guess because George was Irish, he kind of anointed him. But I don't think Sullivan ever really got him." Carlin appeared on the show ten more times.

In the spring of 1967 Carlin released his first comedy album, *Take-offs and Put-ons*—with a cover filled with dozens of photo-booth mug shots of Carlin, with jacket, tie, and short hair, making faces at the camera. Carlin all but disowned the album later, dismissing his early material as the kind of superficial trivia he later moved beyond. But it is a terrific record, one of the high points of 1960s stand-up. Carlin's media parodies were simply leagues beyond what anyone else was doing at the time. In his signature "Wonderful Wino" bit, Carlin drew on his experience as a radio DJ, nailing the high-pitched Top 40 babble of the era with possibly the fastest dialogue ever spoken on a comedy record:

> We got stacks and stacks of wax and wax, we got the pick to click the ones to watch the oldies but goodies the newies but gooeys, we got the top seven hundred records here in the world of Wonderful Wino—*Wonder-ful Wi-no*.

In a brisk five minutes, Carlin skewers pop-chart fever ("another tune here, this one's brand-new, hasn't even been released yet, it's number one on the charts this week, next week it'll be a golden oldie . . ."), song styles ranging from doo-wop to folk protest (including Danny and the Demonstrators' anthem "Don't Want No War," which ends with a very un-Carlin-like swipe at war protesters: "Don't want no job neither!"), beach movies, acne commercials, and the whole ridiculously peppy Top 40 ethic, where even world crises can't stop the beat:

> *Bulletin, bulletin, bulletin! Bulletin, bulletin, bulletin!* The sun did not come up this morning, huge cracks have appeared in the earth's surface, and big rocks are falling out of the sky. Details twenty-five minutes from now on Action Central News, kids!

Carlin put his absurdist twist on media clichés across the dial. As sportscaster Biff Burns (a name Jack Burns had used in their act), he rattles off the basketball scores: "quickly, because we are running late—110 to 102, 125 to 113, 131 to 127. And in an overtime dual, 95 to 94. That was a

squeaker." His parodies of commercials, game shows, and soap operas were quick and lethal, no fat on them. "What have germs got to do with bad breath?" asks the naïve consumer in the old Listerine ads. "Germs *have* bad breath," the pitchman replies. After the *Queen for a Day* contestant pours out her tale of woe—husband out of work, mounting hospital bills, no food for the kids—the emcee asks, momentously, "And if you win, what would you like?" She answers brightly: "A set of golf clubs."

"I didn't realize there was a classification, media parody, until later," Carlin says. "I think I was looking for familiar frames of reference that lend themselves to distortion. Because distortion is one of the most important things in comedy. You look at an ordinary event, an ordinary tableau, and you say, what element can I distort in this? And suddenly you have at least the potential for a joke." But it was more than just a joke. The subtext of his spoofs was how thoroughly pop culture has brainwashed us. Throw any nonsense you like into the familiar formats and formulas, and we're too brain-dead to notice. Carlin's critique of American consumer culture starts here.

That critique was about to get much more overt. It was 1967, and Carlin was having trouble ignoring the counterculture revolution going on around him. The flower children in San Francisco were celebrating the Summer of Love. LSD guru Timothy Leary issued his call to "turn on, tune in, drop out." Dustin Hoffman articulated, with his vacant inarticulateness, a generation's disaffection in *The Graduate*. Protests against the Vietnam War within months would force President Lyndon B. Johnson to abandon his bid for re-election. Carlin, meanwhile, felt trapped in his showbiz prison.

By now he was one of the hottest young comics in the country: getting steady work in nightclubs, appearing regularly on TV, cohosting (with Buddy Greco and Buddy Rich) *The Jackie Gleason Show*'s summer-replacement series, *Away We Go*, in 1967. But he was having trouble reconciling the clash between his "A life," the short-haired comic doing jokes about radio DJs and TV commercials, and his "B life," the backstage Carlin who smoked dope and felt a bond with the protesters. "I hung out with musicians, and I see their hair got longer and their clothing changed," he says. "I started to see people singing protest songs. I hear that people are using their talent to express their point of view, and their point of view is political. And I have all these feelings too. And I'm doing all these superficial things, about the media and disc jockeys and ladies on quiz shows. And I'm doing them for the enemy."

It took a while for him to square this epiphany with the career plan he had sketched out more than a decade earlier. "I was living out this mainstream dream. I was gonna be an actor; I was gonna be like Danny Kaye. Not realizing that I was an outlaw and I didn't have a Danny Kaye gene in my body." Pot and hallucinogens helped him make the break. "These are value-changing drugs," he says. "They change your point of view, especially if you already are kind of bent in one direction."

Starting in 1968, Carlin began to change his looks and his comedy. He let his hair grow. In February 1970 (Carlin noted it in his logbook) he started a beard. He talked about what was going through his mind on daytime talk programs like *The Mike Douglas Show* and *The Virginia Graham Show*. (When he told Graham, the silver-haired doyenne of daytime, that he smoked dope, she responded brightly: "Henry Mancini smokes pot! He said so on the air here.") In clubs he began doing more provocative material—about drugs, Vietnam, corporate America. He tried to ease the transition for his old middlebrow audiences, even making up a poem to demystify his long hair:

Fred Astaire got no hair
Nor does a chair
Nor a chocolate éclair
And where is the hair on a pear?
Nowhere, mon frère

Still, the new Carlin came as a shock to fans who came to clubs expecting to see Wonderful Wino and the Hippy-Dippy Weatherman. At the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas in October 1969, Carlin was opening for the Supremes when he did a bit about his small ass. "I'm one of these white guys who if you look at me sideways, I go from the shoulder blades right to the feet," he said. "Straight line. No ass. When I was in the Air Force, black guys used to look at me in the shower and say, 'Hey man, you ain't got no ass. Where your ass at?' " An early-evening crowd of golfers and their wives—there for the Howard Hughes Invitational golf tournament—complained to the management afterward, and the hotel cut his engagement short.

The following August, Carlin was back at the Frontier to fill out the remaining dates on his contract. This time, he got in trouble with a routine about the word *shit*. "Listen folks," he said. "I want you to know something. I don't say 'shit.' Buddy Hackett says 'shit' right down the street. Redd Foxx will say 'shit' on the other side of the street. I don't say 'shit.' I'll *smoke* a little of it . . ." That got him fired for good.

Onstage, Carlin was taking more and more chances, or simply blowing

off gigs altogether. In December 1969 he had had his testy encounter with Jules Podell at the Copa. That same month, he skipped out of a City of Hope dinner, was a no-show for an appearance on the game show *Beat the Clock*, and was high on acid for most of his engagement at Mr. Kelly's in Chicago. The following November, at the Playboy Hotel in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, he nearly caused an audience riot.

It was the early show on Saturday night at one of the last of the mainline clubs he would play. The audience got riled up as soon as Carlin began making cracks about Vietnam. "I had a very conservative Milwaukee crowd, who were part of the older-generation thought process," Carlin recalls. "One big blond guy who would have made a perfect casting director's dream for one of those Nazi officers, says, 'How would you know about war? You've never been shot at!' I probably did some back-and-forth with him. Then it became an uproar. Some were standing and leaving; some were shaking their fists at me."

Carlin wanted to end the show early, but he was afraid he'd be in breach of his contract and wouldn't get paid. So he bulled through to the end and then, as a show of defiance, walked offstage through the audience. In the near-mêlée around him, he noticed one college-age couple sitting alone at a table applauding him. A couple of hours later, back in his room, Carlin got a telegram—sent by the hotel to its own guest—cutting his engagement short and telling him to vacate the premises: the hotel could no longer guarantee his safety.

Bette Midler, the young singer who was Carlin's opening act, was taken aback when her headliner got canned. "I remember he had these plastic novelties—vomit, poop—and he started talking about this dreadful country where people would actually go and spend money on things like this. He was talking about important things like hunger and social injustice. I was right with him, and I thought it was brave and all that. But they didn't like it. I just remember being so shocked that they would let him go, because I thought what he was doing was perfectly reasonable."

Worse for Carlin, the hotel refused to pay him the $1,300 he was owed for the rest of his weekend gig. He needed the money, so he drove all the way to Chicago to plead his case with Hugh Hefner, his old patron from the Burns and Carlin days: "I figure, here's a guy who stands for freedom of speech, you know? I said to him, that's thirteen hundred dollars, and that may not be much to you or to them, but it's very important to me this week."

"George, there are two Hefs," Hefner told him. "One of them would have enjoyed that show. And the other one is a businessman." Carlin never got paid.

Kellem, Carlin's agent, blanched when he read the reports of the Lake Geneva debacle in *Variety*: "Usually a bad review says your client didn't get any laughs. This one says my client was chased off the stage, the townspeople are coming with torches. That is not a good review." Both Kellem and Carlin's manager, Golden, were feeling increasingly estranged from their client. "It got very tense between us," says Golden. "He just said there's something else I need to be doing with comedy. This isn't it. I could see he was horrendously unhappy. This had become a straitjacket."

It's hard to overstate how courageous Carlin's career reinvention was. He was turning his back on a successful stand-up career and trying to start all over again as . . . what? It was almost as if he were plotting a career path in reverse. His goal was to drop the Copa and the big rooms in Vegas and return to the coffeehouses and colleges, where he thought his natural audience was. The financial gamble was huge. After he got fired by the Frontier Hotel for the second time, he and Brenda had to back out of a deal to buy their first home. "I said good; they did me a favor. I told Brenda, I'm gonna go do the coffeehouses and prove I can do this. And if all I'm ever able to do in my life is fill up a coffeehouse all week long, I'll be fucking happy." Brenda backed him up and even helped put together a press kit explaining his new image. Carlin signed it with his left hand in a childlike scrawl—which did nothing to alter the perception among many that Carlin had flipped out.

Carlin hired new managers, Jeff Wald and Ron De Blasio, who came to see him in Denver when he was working at the Playboy Club and told him he needed an image makeover. "He was a hip guy who didn't look hip," says Wald, a former talent booker for Mr. Kelly's who was married to Helen Reddy. "I saw something underneath. He looked like a guy trying to escape. Yet he couldn't win with the hip crowd because he looked like their accountant." Wald worked hard to convince smaller clubs like the Bitter End and the Troubadour to book Carlin—whom they dismissed as a Las Vegas–*Ed Sullivan* act. The Troubadour finally gave him a one-night gig for $250. "I always say I took George Carlin from two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year down to about twelve thousand dollars and improved his career," says Wald.

Carlin's log of his tour dates in 1970 and '71 shows his career schizophrenia at the time. A few old-line venues like Mr. Kelly's and the San Francisco Playboy Club ("last straight night club," reads his journal notation in December 1970) are interspersed with smaller, low-paying clubs like the Ice House in Pasadena, the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C., and the Frog and Nightgown in Raleigh, North Carolina. (Carlin drove to that

last one all the way from Los Angeles in his new Trans Am, with one hundred rolled-up joints stuffed in a Kleenex box on the front seat next to him.) On May 3, 1971, Carlin collected an unemployment check. A month later he was a last-minute fill-in for Mort Sahl at Santa Monica College. "First standing ovation," reads his journal. It was a heartening milestone. "This is what I aspired to," he says. "This is what I wanted to use the coffeehouses for, to get to the colleges and the concerts. The hair on my arms was probably standing up, it was just so moving. Such affirmation of what I believed about myself."

Still, the transition wasn't easy. For a while *The Tonight Show*, spooked by the reports of his stage antics and drug use, stopped booking him. Dismayed, Carlin requested a personal meeting with Johnny Carson, to try to explain where his head was at. "The word went around the business that I was kind of a crackpot, a risk, and I think it filtered back to Johnny Carson's people. I went over to explain to him that it was a rational choice I had made, and that I was moving in a new direction and that people were buying it, in the colleges and coffeehouses, and that I should be seen seriously again. The trouble was that I was on a coke run when I went over. I was kind of speedy, I had a tie-dyed T-shirt on, and I think it further distanced them from me. The freeze-out continued."

But with Wald's help Carlin got a new record deal—on Flip Wilson's label, Little David—and in May 1971 he recorded a second album, *FM & AM*, at the Cellar Door in Washington. Carlin was so disappointed with his performance that he was in tears after the recording session. But the album, released the following January, was a successful coming-out party for his new career. One side (*AM*) represented Carlin's old style—parodies of TV game shows, lessons on how to imitate Ed Sullivan, a new Wonderful Wino routine. The other side (*FM*) showcased Carlin's new, more socially conscious material, the stuff that had been getting him into trouble at the Copa and the Frontier Hotel. He talked about dope—arguing (as Lenny Bruce had) that the "drug problem" is just as prevalent among the middle class, from coffee freaks at the office to housewives hooked on diet pills to college athletes ("the right wing's last line of defense on campus") hopped up on amphetamines. He tweaked America's puritanical view of sex and Madison Avenue's craven exploitation of it in commercials—birth control pills, he predicted, will one day be marketed with cute brand names like Preg-Not and Embry-No. He riffed on the word *shit*, so endlessly adaptable and yet so frightening to the middle class: "You can't fool me," he said. "*Shoot* is *shit* with two *o*'s."

Carlin had struck the mother lode. He was expanding on many of Bruce's themes, but with more precision and punch. And his timing was better. Bruce's radical critique of society came at the end of the Eisenhower years, and he was never preaching to more than a devoted choir. A decade later, that choir had gathered millions of converts and was starting to change the country: the United States was moving toward the exit in Vietnam, and the sexual revolution was fast obliterating the taboos that Bruce had butted up against. Carlin's *FM & AM*, coming after several years of declining sales for comedy records, was a surprise hit, spending thirty-five weeks on the *Billboard* pop chart. "The album broke everything wide open," says Wald. "It hit a nerve. He was the right guy for the time—sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, Vietnam. He was the guy who resonated."

Over the next five years, Carlin recorded four more albums, sold out college concerts, and opened up a rich new vein of material, both personal and political. In *Class Clown*, which came out in late 1972, he explored his Morningside Heights childhood, reminiscing about schoolroom stunts like knuckle cracking, arm farting, and cheek popping in obsessive, mock-clinical detail. His vivid account of his Catholic school days was a masterpiece of autobiographical vaudeville and theological criticism. Take his neat summary of the Catholic notion of sin:

> It's what's in your mind that counts. Your intentions. *Wanna* was a sin all by itself. If you woke up in the morning, said I'm going down to Forty-second Street and commit a mortal sin—*save your carfare, you did it, man!* It was a sin for you to *wanna* feel up Ellen, it was a sin for you to *plan* to feel up Ellen, it was a sin for you to figure out a place to feel up Ellen, it was a sin to take Ellen to the place to feel her up, it was a sin to try to feel her up, and it was a sin to feel her up. There was six sins in one!"

Around this time Carlin also came up with his famous censor-baiting routine, "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Like Bruce, he attacked society's fear of language head-on. But with no cops waiting to spring the cuffs on him, Carlin brought more mocking good spirit to the enterprise:

> There are four hundred thousand words in the English language—and there are seven of them you can't say on television. What a ratio that is! Three hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-three—to

seven. They must *really be baaa-aaad*. They'd have to be *outrageous* to be separated from a group that large: "All of you over here, you seven—*bad words*!" That's what they told us they are—*bad words*. There are no bad words. Bad thoughts. Bad intentions. And *woooords*.

Carlin had fun with the list (for the record: *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker*, and *tits*). He played with their sound ("*Tits*—such a friendly sounding word. Sounds like a nickname, right? 'Hey, Tits, c'mere man . . . ' "). He explained the no-shows (words with dual meanings, for example—"You can prick your finger, but don't finger your prick"). He gave due consideration to proposed additions (a thumbs-up for *turd* and *twat*) and criticism of some of his original choices (compound words like *cocksucker* probably don't belong, he conceded, but it would upset the rhythm of the list). The message, of course: in the end, they're just *woooords*.

Carlin was arrested once for doing the routine—at an outdoor Summerfest concert in Milwaukee, where children were inadvertently able to hear it—but the charge of public profanity was dismissed. The routine did, however, prompt a First Amendment fight that wound up changing prime-time television. When New York City radio station WBAI played Carlin's routine on the air in 1973, it was slammed with a reprimand by the Federal Communications Commission. The station appealed, and a court of appeals reversed the FCC's order. But in 1978 the Supreme Court upheld the FCC's right to ban "patently offensive" language during hours when children are in the audience. That decision led to the creation of TV's "family hour"—a requirement that the first hour of prime time, from eight to nine P.M. eastern time, be reserved for family-friendly programming.

The "seven dirty words" routine (as it became popularly known) eventually made it to television—on Carlin's first concert special for HBO, taped at the University of Southern California in April 1977. The fledgling cable channel had been airing stand-up concert specials for just over a year (by old-timers like Henny Youngman as well as younger comics like Robert Klein), and it would, through the last half of the '70s and the '80s, become an important platform for the new generation of stand-ups. Yet Carlin's material was considered risky at the time even for HBO. "People in the company were afraid of it, and we sort of muscled it on the air," says Michael Fuchs, then HBO's programming chief, who scheduled the show on Good Friday, just to be provocative. "We were warriors in those days."

Still, Carlin's dirty-words routine was controversial enough that HBO

felt obliged to include an opening disclaimer, taped by columnist Shana Alexander. "We respect your decision about whether you want to see [the show]," she said. "It contains language you hear every day on the street, though rarely on TV." Even that wasn't enough. Just before Carlin launched into his X-rated bit in the concert's final minutes, HBO froze the frame and added a last-minute cautionary message, like one of those hokey warnings in an old William Castle horror film: "The final segment of Mr. Carlin's performance contains especially controversial language. Please consider whether you wish to continue viewing." The show, in the end, aired without incident.

In the first flush of his counterculture success, Carlin could be gratuitously crude and pandering—with frequent drug references to get the college crowds howling. But as a social satirist, he was more penetrating than ever. He loved dissecting the illogic of language (oxymora like "military intelligence" and "jumbo shrimp") and the social uses of euphemism ("When did 'toilet paper' become 'bathroom tissue'? When did 'house trailers' become 'mobile homes'?"). Bruce had taken on commercialized religion; Carlin tackled the very notion of an omnipotent God:

> How can he be perfect? He's not. It shows in his work. Take a look at a mountain range: Every mountain different. Leaves are all different. He can't even get two fingerprints the same. And everything he ever makes . . . *dies*.

Carlin considered himself a writer first and performer second; he worked out his material carefully in advance and improvised little once he got in front of an audience. But he was far more than just a verbal comedian; onstage he italicized everything with his wiry body, goofy-elastic face, and repertoire of voices (the shrill, tenor-voiced New York cop, the Edgar Buchanan old coot). Some of this was certainly fueled by drugs. Carlin was heavily into coke by the time he recorded his breakthrough records of the '70s. "If you want to see a cokehead, just look at the pictures on *Occupation Foole*," Carlin told a *Playboy* interviewer years later. (The 1973 album cover shows a scrawny-looking Carlin, wearing a yellow tie-dyed tank top, in a series of contorted poses.) "The body language in those photos tells you everything."

By the mid-'70s, Carlin's drug use was starting to affect his work. He began showing up late to concerts; in some he mumbled nearly inaudibly. At the Westbury Music Fair, a *Newsday* critic reported that many in the crowd couldn't hear him and about a hundred patrons demanded refunds.

At home, Carlin was smoking pot before breakfast, downing twenty beers a day, and going off on four- and five-day coke binges. Brenda was matching him gram for gram and drinking heavily as well. The resulting fights got so bad that when they went on a trip to Hawaii, their daughter, Kelly, then eleven, made them sign a treaty to abstain from drugs. "It lasted all of maybe twenty minutes," says Kelly Carlin-McCall. "I was the only grown-up in the house." After Brenda crashed her car into a hotel lobby, she entered rehab and by 1975 had kicked her habit. Carlin stopped using coke at home but continued doing it on the road.

Carlin admits the cocaine at first had a creative upside. "Onstage, when rapping about a feeling I already owned, I would sometimes get a burst of eloquence," he said in 1982. "For the entertainer, part of the thing you do is just style. And the coke did help me get into great runs of pure form." But then it started to affect his productivity, and his health. In 1978 Carlin suffered a mild heart attack, and it helped prod him to quit. "It was fucking up my family and me," he says, "and it was fucking up my work. I really wasn't being as creative. I lost years. I could have been a pole vaulter in those years, and instead I was kind of like doing hurdles."

Carlin's drug use was at a high point in 1975, when Lorne Michaels booked him as the first guest host for NBC's new late-night comedy series *Saturday Night Live*. Craig Kellem, Carlin's former agent, then working as *SNL*'s talent coordinator, had suggested Carlin for the show. But Michaels saw the comedian as a compromise choice (he preferred Richard Pryor or Lily Tomlin, both of whom he had worked with before), and it was not a happy collaboration on either side. Michaels thought Carlin wasn't in tune with the new-style comedy he wanted his show to represent. "He was slightly older than us, a little more jazz influenced, a little different music," says Michaels. More problematic for Michaels was Carlin's lack of experience as a sketch performer. He was the lead in one sketch written for the first show—playing Alexander the Great at his high school reunion—but it was cut before airtime. "It just didn't play," says Michaels. "He couldn't do it."

"There was a distance from the get-go," says Kellem. "Carlin came in with a very independent attitude. He had definite ideas about what he was going to do and not do. And Lorne was pissed off. He just tuned out." Carlin was at the center of one of the big disputes that gave Michaels grief during that first tension-filled week. The network insisted that Carlin wear a suit and tie on the air; Carlin wanted to wear a T-shirt. After a blowup just before dress rehearsal, they finally compromised on a suit jacket over a T-shirt. To complicate matters, Carlin was in a drug haze for much of

the week. "I'm grinding my jaw and clenching my teeth," Carlin would say years later, after watching a tape of the show. "I remember the amount of cocaine I did that week and it sort of fills me with a feeling of a lost opportunity." (Michaels claims he didn't notice the drugs and says Carlin "couldn't have been nicer.")

Carlin remains the forgotten man in the oft-told tale of *Saturday Night Live*'s birth. Michaels never asked him back (though Carlin did host the show one more time, in 1984, after Michaels was gone), and he was pretty much written out of *SNL*'s seemingly endless retrospectives and tributes. Yet on that first show, when the Not Ready for Prime Time Players were unknown and barely visible in a handful of brief sketches, Carlin did three separate monologues, which gave the show some needed comic ballast. What's more, on a show vowing to revolutionize TV comedy, Carlin was responsible for its only moment of real controversy: his final monologue, on the omnipotence of God, caused the network switchboard to light up with complaints and prompted an angry network rebuke.

As *Saturday Night Live* took off in the late '70s, Carlin's career hit a wall. The Vietnam War protests were long over, the Bee Gees had replaced the Beatles on top of the pop chart, and Carlin's counterculture image, which had caused such a stir just a few years earlier, was looking dated. The hot new comic on the block was Steve Martin, whose balloon animals and happy feet seemed a repudiation of all the social relevance that Carlin had brought to stand-up. Carlin's record sales and concert attendance were dropping, and he seemed to be coasting creatively—playing Vegas again, guesting on *Welcome Back, Kotter*. "I think people were jumping off my bandwagon," he admits. "I wasn't the talk of the town. Creatively I really had nothing new and different to say."

Unlike other stand-up comics who forged second careers in acting or directing, Carlin had little else to turn to. His few forays into movies (small parts in the 1968 Doris Day comedy *With Six You Get Eggroll* and 1976's *Car Wash*) were barely noticed. He thought about doing a concert film, then watched as Richard Pryor released one first in 1979. Carlin tried to develop his own movie, *The Illustrated George Carlin*, which would mix concert footage with live-action and animated scenes. But it never worked out and only drained his finances. The IRS hit him up for back taxes. On a drive back from Toronto to Dayton, he had too many beers, got into an accident, and broke his nose.

Then Carlin staged an unexpected comeback. In the late '70s he gradually weaned himself off coke, and in November 1981 he released his first album in four years, *A Place for My Stuff*. A year later he taped a concert

at Carnegie Hall for HBO, his first for the cable channel in four years. Pulling it off was "a major high-wire act," says Jerry Hamza, a concert promoter who became Carlin's new manager and business partner. The hall was available for only one night, which meant there was no chance to tape a backup dress rehearsal, as is customary. The crew couldn't even get into the auditorium to set up in the afternoon because of a cello concert. Carlin himself, still recovering from a second heart attack, was a little shaky onstage. But wearing a long-sleeve green T-shirt and with neatly trimmed hair and beard, he was more mellow and reflective, opening with a rare reference to his personal problems:

> Been taking a little time off. Had a heart attack . . . I would like to bring you up to date on the comedians' health sweepstakes. As it stands right now, I lead Richard Pryor in heart attacks, two to one. However, Richard still leads me, one to nothing, in burning yourself up.

After the concert, Carlin was disappointed; he thought the hall was cold and the crowd detached and unresponsive. But when the Carnegie Hall concert aired on HBO in January 1983, it revitalized his career. Attendance at his shows, which had dipped below one thousand in some markets, bounced back up to more than four thousand. HBO signed him for more specials. Given a second wind (and shorn of his coke habit), he resumed a busy touring schedule that continued without letup for two more decades. He branched out with books—collections of his random musings like *Brain Droppings* and *Sometimes a Little Brain Damage Can Help*—and even costarred in a short-lived sitcom in 1994.

In the Reagan years, he shifted his focus to antic, small-bore observations ("Have you ever noticed that you never get laid on Thanksgiving? I think it's because all the coats are on the bed"). Then, in the early '90s—realizing he had to raise his voice to compete with younger comics like Sam Kinison—he tacked back toward angrier political material, attacking America's war culture, the environmental movement, and the middle-class obsession with golf. His comedy grew increasingly dark, so that by 2005 he was cheerleading for suicide and mass ecological disaster. "I sort of gave up on this whole human adventure a long time ago," Carlin says. "Divorced myself from it emotionally. I think the human race has squandered its gift, and I think this country has squandered its promise. I think people in America sold out very cheaply, for sneakers and cheeseburgers. I think they lost their way, and I really have no sympathy for that. And I don't think it's fixable."

That cerebral, aloof, rather chilly stand-up persona may be one reason

Carlin was more admired than copied by the comedians who followed him. Richard Pryor, among his major contemporaries, was hailed as the more instinctive genius. Robert Klein's looser, more improv-based style drew more imitators. But for a generation too young to have seen Lenny Bruce, Carlin was the indispensable role model. Comics from Jay Leno to Bill Maher saw him as a major inspiration. An engineering student at the University of Arizona in Tucson named Garry Shandling drove up to Phoenix two nights in a row to show his idol Carlin, appearing at a club there, some monologues he had written. "He sat there with the pages, like a teacher. He said, you're very green, but if you're thinking of pursuing this, I would," says Shandling. "It played a big part in me moving to L.A. to pursue a career in writing. Carlin was breakthrough at the time. Talking to my generation. His sense of humor was extraordinarily on the money. I think he is still underrated."

Carlin's longevity as a stand-up was virtually unique among comics of his era—a top touring comic for four decades with virtually no boost from Hollywood, Broadway, or a hit TV series. It was a testament to his ability to stay on the edge, even as the hair and beard went gray. He evolved from white-bread media parodist to counterculture provocateur to curmudgeonly uncle to apocalyptic pessimist; but what remained constant was his eye for the world's inequities and absurdities, and the caustic eloquence with which he called them to our attention. Even in his late sixties, Carlin was able to distill an entire new vocabulary of Internet-era jargon into one extraordinary "Ode to a Modern Man":

> I've been uplinked and downloaded. I've been inputted and outsourced. I know the upside of downsizing; I know the downside of upgrading. I'm a high-tech lowlife. A cutting-edge, state-of-the-art, bicoastal multitasker, and I can give you a gigabyte in a nanosecond . . .

Carlin's impact was broad and deep. He carried on Bruce's crusade against hypocrisy, cant, and social injustice—for a generation that was more receptive to it and willing to turn it into action. His early takeoffs of DJs and TV commercials set a gold standard for scores of media satirists to follow, and his jokey newscasts provided the template for news parodies from *Saturday Night Live*'s Weekend Update to Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*. His riffs on schoolroom pranks and bodily functions and the little absurdities of language showed the next crop of "observational" comics that nothing was too trivial or mundane—or tasteless—to become fodder for smart comedy.

Just as important, he showed that stand-up comedy could be a noble calling, one that required courage and commitment and that could have an impact outside of its own little world. And you could make a lifetime career of it, without burning out or self-destructing. That was an achievement Richard Pryor—whose career took a much different trajectory after those days smoking dope with Carlin at the Cafe au Go Go—couldn't quite match.

CHAPTER 3

Race

One thing I found out. When you're on fire and runnin' down the street, people get out of your way.

—Richard Pryor

Even as George Carlin was transforming stand-up comedy in the late 1960s and early '70s, the old guard was still a force to be reckoned with. Bob Hope's polished one-liners about the president defined topical stand-up comedy for most Americans well into the '70s. Ed Sullivan might occasionally bring on young turks like Carlin, but his tastes ran mainly to old-school comics like Jack Carter and Alan King. Pushing the envelope in Las Vegas, for most of Middle America, didn't mean Carlin's drug jokes, but the risqué one-liners of Buddy Hackett and Shecky Greene.

Yet the times were changing, and the old gagmen knew it. During the upheavals of the late '60s, Las Vegas was struggling to stay relevant, and hip young comics like Carlin were seen as a key to attracting the younger audience—most of whom were going off to rock festivals, not booking rooms at the Riviera Hotel. But Carlin was thumbing his nose at traditional Vegas comedy. "In an instant he made them old-fashioned," says Dennis Klein, who wrote for Shecky Greene and other Vegas comics in those years (and later created TV sitcoms like *Buffalo Bill* and *The Larry Sanders Show*). "He was seen as a turncoat. He was slapping them in the face."

But if Carlin was a turncoat, Richard Pryor was a threat. His raw, racially provocative comedy seemed an emblem, not just of the changes comedy was undergoing, but of the turmoil gripping the whole country—the rising tensions of an era when peaceful civil-rights demonstrations were giving way to the militant rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. That generational clash surfaced in a rare public way one afternoon in 1974,