

TWO RABBIS WALK INTO A BAR

5,769 years of the Jewish joke. By Christopher Bonanos

Sigmund Freud (b. 1856)
Author of *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*; "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

The Talmud (A.D. 200-1200)
A little slow to get to the punch line. But it instills a taste for language play, and for parsing language, in Jewish culture.

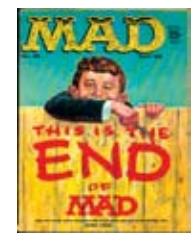


The Yiddish Theater: Centered on Second Avenue on the Lower East Side.
"The famous Yiddish actor Boris Thomashefsky takes a whore back to his hotel room. After they do the deed, instead of paying her, he hands her a pair of tickets to that night's show. Annoyed, she says, 'With these you can buy bread?' 'You want bread,' Thomashefsky says, 'screw a baker.'"

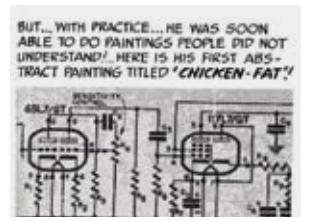


"Any time a person goes into a delicatessen and orders a pastrami on white bread, somewhere a Jew dies."
—MILTON BERLE

Milton Berle: Uncle Miltie grabs a brand-new medium—television—by the arm and pumps the humor out of it with vaudeville shtick, furious mugging, and a lot of cross-dressing.



Mad magazine: Indoctrinates American kids to the rhythms of Yiddish humor and tells them to stick a thumb in the eye of authority.



Several thousand years of oppression
Nothing brings the funny like coping with shared misery.



"I've had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn't it."
—GROUCHO MARX



The Marx Brothers: Yorkville Jews to the core, though only Groucho plays up his Jewishness.

The Catskills: Every resort has a *tummler*—an emcee whose endless rapid-fire patter keeps families entertained for weeks on end.
"A guy checks into a hotel with his wife. He goes to breakfast, goes to Simon Says, eats lunch, lies around the pool, rows on the lake, plays softball, eats dinner, goes to the early show, goes to the late show, then goes to the coffee shop. Finally, at four in the morning, the wife says: 'Let's go to bed.' 'Why?' he asks. 'Who's appearing there?'"
—Freddie Roman, former tummler

Henny Youngman: A trunkful of one-liners, cultivated during 60 years spent in vaudeville and then nightclubs.
"Jewish man gets hit by a car. Paramedics come, and one asks him, 'Are you comfortable?' The man says, 'I make a nice living.'"
—HENNY YOUNGMAN

Sid Caesar & Co. create a smart template for sketch comedy. Writers' room is a future dream team: Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Neil and Danny Simon, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, Carl Reiner.
Caesar's sketches are so visual that they can barely be quoted. But visit YouTube and watch (among others) "The Clock," a nearly wordless masterpiece.

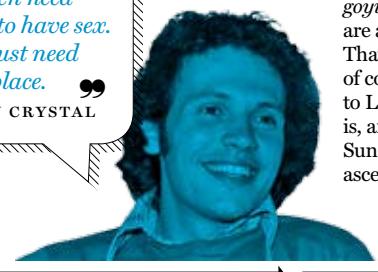
Mort Sahl: Nightclub comedian as intellectual. Sahl arrives onstage with the day's paper under his arm.



"Liberals feel unworthy of their possessions. Conservatives feel they deserve everything they've stolen."
—MORT SAHL

THE ANGRY SCHLEMIELS
Richard Belzer, Richard Lewis, Larry David: Heirs to Lenny Bruce, able (in a freer era) to shock without getting arrested.

"Women need a reason to have sex. Men just need a place."
—BILLY CRYSTAL

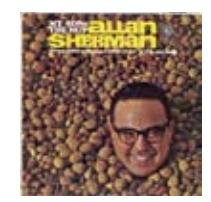


THE FRIENDLY SCHLEMIELS
Billy Crystal, David Brenner, Paul Reiser, Garry Shandling: They are Jewish, yes, and they make the odd joke about their Jewishness, but they are palatable to *goyish* middle America and are a big hit on television. That in turn shifts the center of comedy more and more to L.A., where the TV work is, and the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard is in the ascendant.

Albert Brooks: Raised in Beverly Hills, California, Brooks (birth name: Albert Einstein) creates an L.A. version of Allen's New York angst with softer punch lines.
"If anything happens to me, tell every woman I've ever gone with I was talking about her at the end. That way, they'll have to re-evaluate me."

"People say money is not the key to happiness, but I've always figured if you have enough money, you can get a key made."
—JOAN RIVERS

Joan Rivers: She and Phyllis Diller are the only women who crack an all-male standup scene.
Allan Sherman: Parody songs packed with Jewy references.



Mel Brooks: Former TV writer takes lowbrow material (fart jokes, bird-poop sight gags) and leverages it into smart stand-up and movies.
CARL REINER: "Did you live before man believed in the Almighty?" BROOKS, AS THE 2,000-YEAR-OLD MAN: "Oh yeah, a few years before." REINER: "Did you believe in any superior being?" BROOKS: "Yes. A guy Phil."

Woody Allen: Allen creates the nebbish character he'll mine for the next five decades.
Lenny Bruce: Busted open every language taboo, and literally died trying to go further than that.



"A lot of people say to me, 'Why did you kill Christ?' I dunno ... it was one of those parties that got out of hand."
—LENNY BRUCE

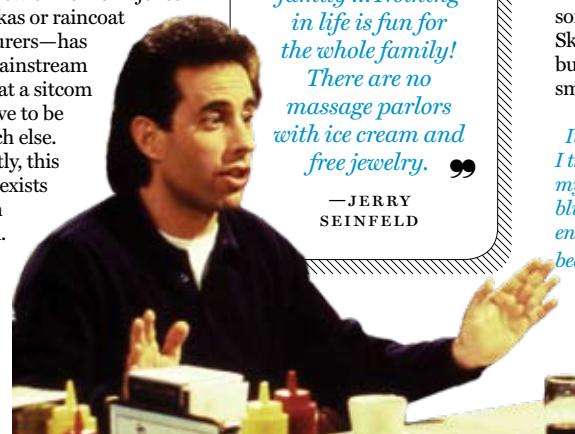
Mike Nichols and Elaine May: The thinking man's sketch comics. Their college-educated, sketch-driven shtick was a hit in smart living rooms nationwide and sold millions of albums.
In a sketch where they play a couple necking in a car:
MAY: "If I went any further, you wouldn't respect me."
NICHOLS: "Oh, you have no idea how I'd respect you. I'd respect you like crazy!"

THE ASSIMILATORS
Christopher Guest, Rob Reiner, Nora Ephron, Eugene Levy: Their movies and sketches often involve Jewishness but don't depend on it. And—continuing the innovation of Woody Allen—it's less about jokes, more story.

From Ephron's script for *When Harry Met Sally*:
SALLY: "What's she like?"
MARIE: "Thin. Pretty. Big tits. Your basic nightmare."

Jerry Seinfeld: The perfect comic for the new unscary New York. Old-style Jewish humor—jokes about babkas or raincoat manufacturers—has become mainstream enough that a sitcom doesn't have to be about much else. Significantly, this New York exists entirely on sets in L.A.

"Fun for the whole family ... Nothing in life is fun for the whole family! There are no massage parlors with ice cream and free jewelry."
—JERRY SEINFELD



Adam Sandler, Ben Stiller: Stand-ins for every goofball Long Island guy whoever made up silly songs over Thanksgiving dinner. Sketch and improv comedy has all but superseded stand-up as the smart comic's idiom.
It's horrible being alone. I threw a surprise party for myself ... I set up a piñata, with a blindfold and a baseball bat, and ended up at my neighbor's house, beating up their grandmother."
—ADAM SANDLER

Jon Stewart: The true heir to Sahl. Politically engaged, arch, and sometimes able, as a fake-news anchor, to pull off what the real journalists can't.
"Jews and blacks come from the same history—2,000 years of bullshit. We just expressed our suffering differently as blues. Jews complain—we just never thought of putting it to music."
—JON STEWART

"I was raped by a doctor. Which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl."
—SARAH SILVERMAN



Sarah Silverman: A new spin on the aggressive seventies idiom: Silverman works the edge of cringey racial and sexual taboos and gets away with it partly because she looks so winsome.

WAIT, THEY'RE JEWISH?
Judd Apatow, Seth Rogen, Jack Black, Paul Rudd: Semitic but assimilated, they largely forsake the striver and of-the-tribe personas in favor of slackerdom. These Jews are just everyschnooks with curly hair and fast comebacks, and they don't live in New York L.A., for all its sun and lack of angst, has won.
From *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*:
DAVID: "Did you just flick me in the balls?"
CAL: "No. I flicked you in the fleshy patch where your balls used to be."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON LEE