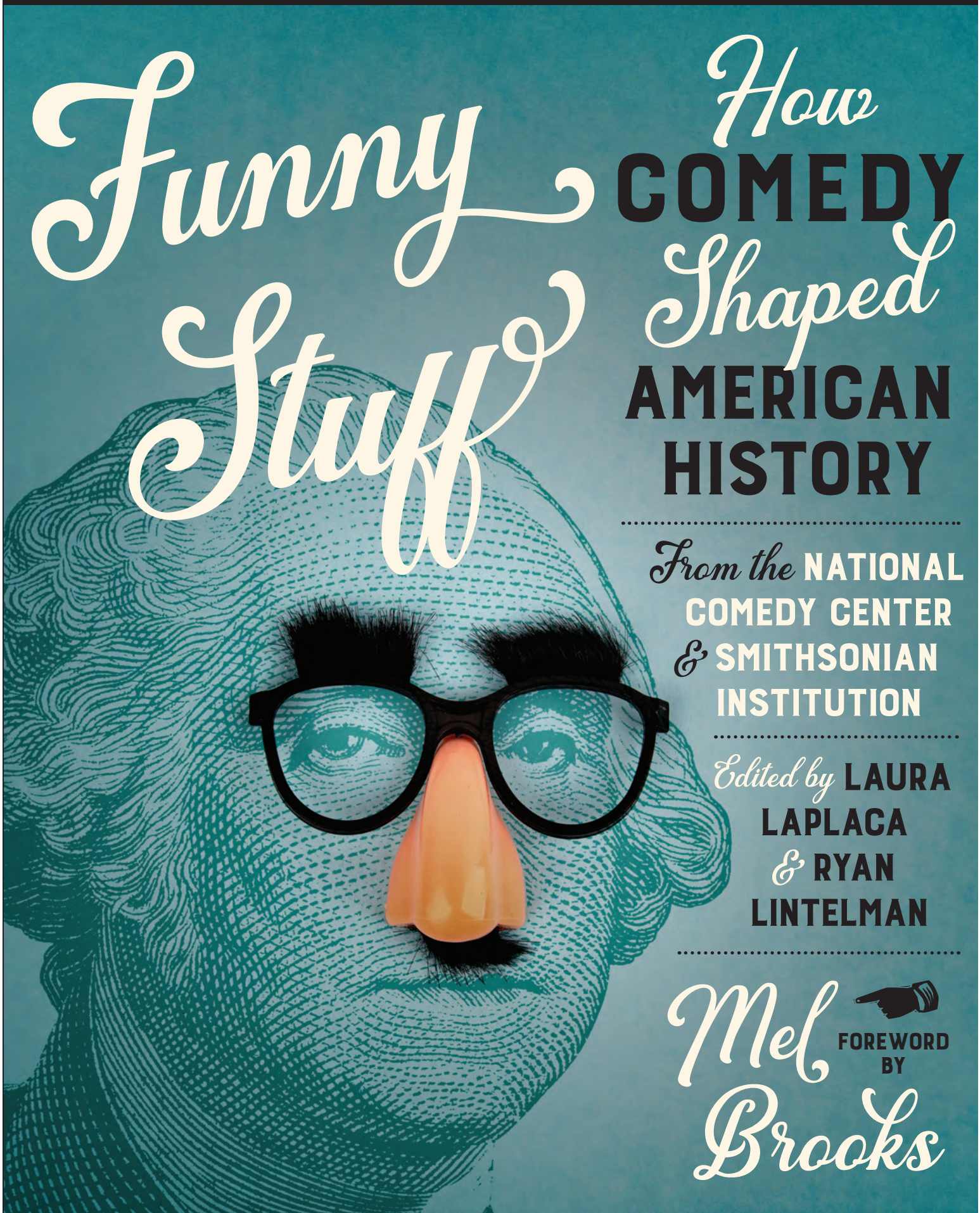
Funny Stuff

How COMEDY Shaped AMERICAN HISTORY



From the NATIONAL COMEDY CENTER & SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Edited by LAURA LAPLACA & RYAN LINTELMAN

Foreword by Mel Brooks

Above (Top to Bottom)

Hawkeye shirt from *MASH*. Alan Alda portrayed anti-war, pleasure-seeking Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, chief surgeon of the 4077th M*A*S*H unit. He wore this Hawaiian shirt in the pilot episode and others throughout the series' run, often with a martini in hand.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, gift of Twentieth Century Fox, catalog number 1983.0095.003.

Promotional photo of comedian and actor Margaret Cho from her 2023 Live and Livid Comedy Tour. In a statement announcing the tour, Cho promised fans "I will be radiating rage about homophobia, sexism, racism and the fight to stay alive in a culture that is killing us daily."

Photograph by Sergio Garcia.

Above (Top to Bottom)

Bert and Ernie puppets.

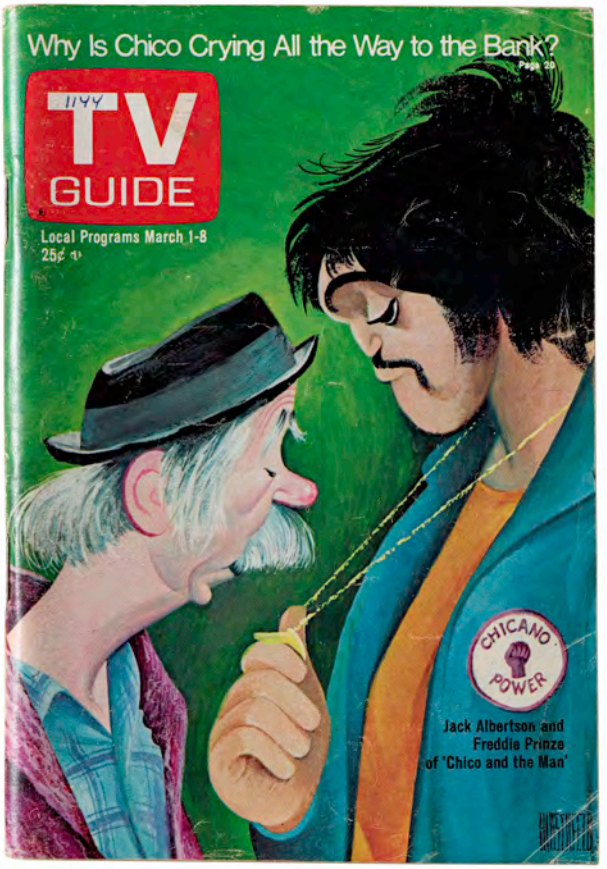
Credit line: National Museum of American History, Gift of the Family of Jim Henson: Lisa Henson, Cheryl Henson, Brian Henson, John Henson and Heather Henson, catalog numbers 2013.0101.13-14.

Groucho costume eyeglasses. These Groucho Marx costume eyeglasses were worn by Alan Alda portraying Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce on the television series *M*A*S*H*. The sardonic surgeon's sharp wit and world-weary characterization were partially inspired by Groucho. Freethinking and countercultural Americans rediscovered the Marx Brothers' anti-establishment irreverence and cynicism in the 1960s and 70s.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, gift of Twentieth Century Fox, catalog number 1983.0095.009.

All in the Family living room. Norman Lear donated the Bunkers's living room furniture set to the National Museum of History and Technology (now the National Museum of American History) in 1978, and the props have been visitor favorites ever since. Lear had the show's set designers dress the Bunker house set in drab, sepia-toned furniture, props, and textiles to make viewers feel as if they were looking at an old family photo album.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, Gift of Tandem/TAT Productions, catalog number 1978.2146.01-06.



Top Row (Left to Right)

In Living Color cast

Jeannie bottle. Never mind that it was really a painted glass bourbon decanter, the groovy genie's bottle that Major Tony Nelson found on a desert island in the South Pacific represented pure magic for the TV viewers that made *I Dream of Jeannie* a hit for the NBC network from 1965 to 1970, and for generations that would discover it in rerun syndication.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, gift of Barbara Eden, catalog number 2022.0140.01.

Bottom Row (Left to Right)

Phyllis Diller costume. Phyllis Diller wore this green costume ensemble when she joined Bob Hope's USO Christmas tour in 1966.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, Gift of Phyllis Diller, catalog numbers 2003.0289.05.01-04; 2003.0289.11.

Chico and the Man TV guide. The Al Hirschfeld illustration on the cover of this 1975 issue of *TV Guide* features illustrations of stars Jack Albertson and Freddie Prinze. Prinze's energetic and upbeat Chico Rodriguez answered the racist and cynical comments spewed by Albertson's Ed Brown with pride and aplomb, softening the character's prejudice over the course of the series. The illustration features Chico wearing a "Chicano Power" patch, underscoring how the show transformed the Chicano movement into a domestic comedy.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, catalog number 2023.0083.01.

Blackface makeup. This tube of "Stein's Black Face for Minstrel Make-Up" illustrates how widespread and industrialized blackface minstrelsy had become by the early 20th century. Performers from amateurs to professionals could purchase jet black greasepaint off the shelf for their productions of racial caricature.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, catalog number 2016.0145.01.

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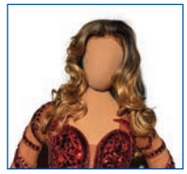


The first Mickey Mouse Club was organized in 1930 by the manager of the Fox Dome Theater in Ocean Park, California, who saw the potential to use the popular Mickey Mouse character to increase ticket sales. The clubs were designed to encourage brand loyalty, but also aspired to educate children in good citizenship "through inspirational, patriotic, and character building activities related to the Club."

could draw on a hidden reservoir of disruptive energy to conquer the challenges before them.

Animation has its roots in the experimental motion pictures that preceded the introduction of film, but really began to develop as a genre of cinema in the 1910s. Experimental animated films like cartoonist Windsor McCay's 1914 *Gertie the Dinosaur* used paper illustrations and cutouts to simulate movement. In the years that followed, innovative artists like John Bray and Max and Dave Fleischer used new technology and media like transparent celluloid "cels" to improve and simplify the animation process, making it more viable and profitable. The first animated star was Felix the Cat, created by Otto Messmer for Pat Sullivan Studios in 1919. The sensationally popular Felix film series demonstrated the possibilities of animation, with fantastic landscapes and settings, surreal visual effects, and a fully fleshed main character whose cunning, liberated, trickster attitude made him a popular culture icon. Felix was celebrated in song, made a mascot, adapted as a comic strip, and licensed for a bewildering array of merchandise and toys.

Naturally, Felix's success inspired competitors, and Walt Disney was the most successful of them all. The struggling animator believed that synchronized sound was the future of animation and made his 1928 film *Steamboat Willie* a showcase for the emerging technology. Though it was not technically Mickey Mouse's first screen appearance, the film's success kickstarted his rise to superstardom. Mickey was an anthropomorphic mouse with large, round black ears whose characterization as a plucky underdog drew inspiration from silent comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. Mickey's characterization also drew inspiration from blackface minstrelsy, which lent Mickey the expressive features, white gloves on impossibly dark skin, and natural musicality he displays in early appearances, especially in his debut, where he performs the minstrel song "Turkey in the Straw / Old Zip Coon."[37]

This drawing was made by Disney animation artist Ub Iwerks for the 1928 sound debut of Mickey Mouse, *Steamboat Willie*. Mickey Mouse seemed to represent the spirit of the 1930s United States with his scrappy determination and good humor.

Mickey became enormously popular as the star of Disney's animated comedy film shorts, surpassing Felix, who failed to make the transition

to the sound era. In parodies and homages to other film genres, he was sometimes portrayed as a swashbuckling hero, sometimes a scrappy regular Joe frustrated in his romantic pursuit of Minnie Mouse, though over time they became dedicated sweethearts. As the series expanded through the early 1930s, he was also joined by his dog Pluto, his dim-witted but good-natured friend Goofy, and his sometimes-rival Donald Duck. Hundreds of Mickey Mouse Clubs sprang up across the country to cater to communities of mostly young fans as Disney increasingly positioned him as a role model. As other characters took on the mantle of the mischievous and juvenile prankster, Mickey was more often depicted as a humble and virtuous hero, thoughtful friend, and good citizen.

While Disney refocused on feature-length animation starting with *Snow White* in 1937, other studios continued to explore the comic potential of animation. The Fleischers adapted the spinach-eating strongman Popeye comic strip to film and created the flapper sex symbol Betty Boop. Walter Lanz introduced the madcap trickster Woody Woodpecker, and William Hanna and Joseph Barbera launched a series of Tom and Jerry cat and mouse cartoons. In 1930, a group of ex-Disney animators took their talents to Warner Brothers to help launch the animation shop there: the Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes* series melded music from the entertainment company's recording catalog with a sensational style of animation, especially after its transition to color. *Looney Tunes* filmmakers Chuck Jones and Tex Avery imbued the series with a modern, fast-paced style involving rapid-fire joke delivery, hip, colloquial dialogue and dialect, and irreverent, referential humor. The series developed a memorable slate of characters including Porky Pig, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, and its biggest star, Bugs Bunny.

Bugs Bunny's clever, self-assured wise guy attitude made him a popular hero and American icon during World War II. Not one to pick a fight, Bugs is nevertheless willing to give as good as he gets, and in his *Looney Tunes* shorts, he took cartoon violence and madcap hijinks to new heights.

Bugs made his first appearance in *Porky's Hare Hunt* (1938) but was redesigned and given his unique Bronx/Brooklyn accent by Mel Blanc in the

were the justifi ation for the militarization of the border and the criminalization of undocumented people (particularly workers) throughout the eighties and nineties. As immigration and migration from Latin America surged toward the end of the twentieth century, the political discourse positioned migration as a problem to be solved. *Born in East LA* complicated this problem by subverting the "illegal" narrative and underscoring the entrenched racism and prejudice that exists in the U.S. immigration system. Cheech Marin transformed Hollywood's "slapstick, one-dimensional Chicano characters" by using humor to "expose the stereotype as racist."[58]

Comedian Paul Rodriguez (who also played a supporting role in the film as Robles's cousin Javier) called *Born in East LA* the litmus test of being Chicano, pointing to the film's popularity within the Chicanx community. Marin's film exposes the identity crisis that comes along with being "ni de aquí, ni de allá" (not from here nor from there), even for those Mexican Americans and Chicanxs whose presence predates the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Ashley Oliva Mayor

The original Kermit puppet, made by Henson in 1955 from his mother's wool coat, a ping-pong ball, and a pair of jeans. Kermit has appeared in most Muppet productions from *Sam and Friends* (1955) to the most recent movie *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014) and series *Muppets Now* (2020).

THE MUPPETS TAKE AMERICAN HISTORY

In the spring of 1955, nineteen-year-old Jim Henson stitched together pieces of his mother's green felt coat, painted two halves of a ping-pong ball with crossed black eyes, and created a puppet he simply called Kermit. Little did he know that this scrappy sock puppet would go on to become one of the most recognizable and best-loved characters in American history. Th ough television series, films, theme park attractions, video games, and social media, the Muppets conquered American culture with their signature brand of madcap, irreverent humor. Henson's boundless creativity and absurdist sensibility made his Muppets a popular sensation at a time of great cultural change; their expressions of optimism, tolerance, and belief in the power of friendship has made an enduring impression on American history.

Born in Leland, Mississippi, Henson spent his formative years in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., where his father worked for the federal government. An imaginative and creative young man, Jim loved comics (especially Walt Kelly's zany character ensemble *Pogo*) and television, where he was drawn to the silly, subversive humor of Sid Caesar and the visually experimental antics of Ernie Kovacs. Determined to work in the exciting new medium, Jim studied set design, took classes in visual arts at the University of Maryland, and even joined a puppetry club, which led to his first job in television—as a puppeteer. After a brief stint on local daytime variety shows, Jim was offered a show of his own: *Sam and Friends* premiered on Washington's NBC affiliate WRC in 1955.[59]

For *Sam and Friends*, Henson and his partner Jane Nebel (soon to become his wife) created a coterie of fantastic and funny-looking puppets with names like Mushmellon, Icky Gunk, Professor Madcliffe, Yorick, and, most memorably, Kermit. The puppets were soft, simple, and flexible, and operated by hand and rod rather than strings, making them expressive, emotive, and reactive as earlier puppets and marionettes had been too wooden to accomplish. He called them Muppets—either a portmanteau of "marionette" and "puppet" or a play on "moppet," an archaic word describing an endearing youngster. *Sam and Friends* sketches were inventive yet simple—puppets would lip sync and clown to popular songs, parody genre film and television, or engage in banter and special effects tricks that owed a great debt to Ernie Kovacs's

Originally designed in 1962 for a series of commercials for Purina Dog Chow, Rowlf became the first national Muppet star with his regular appearances on *The Jimmy Dean Show*. This is one of the first two Rowlf puppets, made by Muppet builder Don Sahlin from puppet fleece expertly stitched to hide seams and with large eyes and nose positioned in a characteristic "magic triangle" that was essential to the Muppet look.

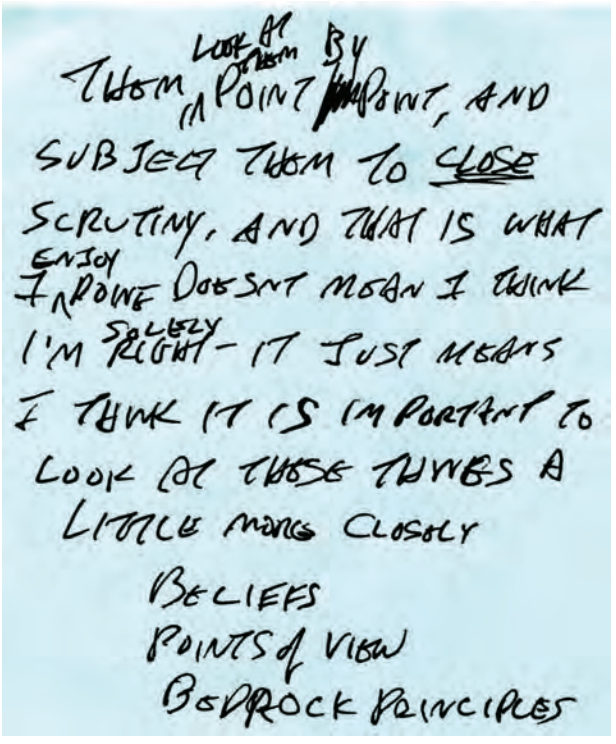
GEORGE CARLIN AND THE SEVEN WORDS

George Carlin was a comedic renegade whose art ranged from philosophical refl ction to political outrage. As the indignant voice of the counterculture, he reinvented stand-up comedy as a form of social criticism, using his platform to counteract the platitudes spewed by politicians, advertisers, religious leaders, and others who conventionalized American thought. His landmark work led to robust cultural debates—including a Supreme Court ruling—that centered issues of censorship, obscenity, and freedom of speech during the tumultuous 1970s in America. As Carlin himself once put it, stand-up was not only his way

of life, his business, and his art, but his means of social and political "survival."

George Carlin was born in New York City in 1937 and grew up on West 121st Street, where he and his younger brother were raised by their mother, Mary. From an early age, he was attentive to the rhythms, sounds, and meanings of words, marveling at a perfectly placed adjective in a newspaper article that his mother read aloud at the breakfast table or the virtuosic wordplay of his boyhood idol, the tongue-twisting comedian Danny Kaye. Though his fascination with language did not result in stellar academic performance (Carlin was expelled from school), it would go on to become the core of his artistic achievement as a stand-up comedian, whose style involved a cadenced, melodious delivery that was not unlike spoken word poetry. George Carlin was also attentive, as a teenager and young adult, to the work of comedians who graced his mother's television screen—a rare commodity in his neighborhood in the early 1950s. Perhaps drawn in by his own rebellious streak, Carlin admired the slapstick antics of the Marx Brothers and Jerry Lewis, whose humor upended social mores, and, in the later 1950s, was galvanized by the "sick" comedy of revolutionary stand-up comedians like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, who were often banned from the airwaves.

After a brief stint in the Air Force, Carlin found his fi st calling as a radio disc jockey. While working in Fort Worth, Texas, in the late 1950s, he met fellow DJ Jack Burns and the two developed a coffeehouse comedy act. The pair found success plying their beatnik style and moved together to Los Angeles, where their album, *Burns and Carlin at the Playboy Club Tonight*, was released before they amicably went their separate ways in the early 1960s.



During this transitional moment in his career, Carlin honed his craft as a solo performer on some of the most demanding stages in American entertainment—in Hollywood and around the country. He developed crowd-pleasing characters like "The Hippie-Dippie Weather Man" and "The Wonderful Wino," and was crafting a unique (if not yet fully formed) ability to toggle between silliness and high intellectualism, between light humor and rebellious insouciance, and between punning wordplay and linguistic rigor. Carlin became a favorite of

Max Klinger, portrayed by Jamie Farr, memorably hoped to earn a Section 8 psychiatric discharge from the Army by dressing in women's clothing. Farr was costumed in repurposed pieces from the 20th Century Fox wardrobe department, including a gold lamé gown previously worn by Ginger Rogers that helped complete this Queen of the Nile ensemble he wore in the season 8 episode "April Fools."

*M*A*S*H:* BINDING UP THE WOUNDS

An exhibition titled "*M*A*S*H*:* Binding Up the Wounds" opened at the National Museum of American History in July 1983. The exhibit, displaying thousands of original props, costumes, and other objects used in the production of the television series that had ended its eleven-season run that year, quickly set new records for attendance, with over a million visitors requesting timed passes. The exhibit's title had a double meaning: the doctors and nurses on the show literally bound up the wounds of the casualties passing through the front-line Korean War hospital each episode, but the series was also widely credited with helping Americans bind the civic wounds caused by the fie ce debate about the Vietnam War.[54]

A television adaptation of the 1970 Robert Altman film of the same name, itself an adaptation of Richard Hooker's 1968 book *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors*, the series debuted on CBS in September 1972. Though it fi st earned poor ratings, the show eventually gained an audience, becoming one of the most popular and successful sitcoms of all time.

Alan Alda portrayed antiwar, pleasure-seeking Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, chief surgeon of the 4077th M*A*S*H unit. He wore this Hawaiian shirt in the pilot episode and others throughout the series' run, often with a martini in hand.

Combining aspects of television medical drama, military comedy, and the workplace sitcom, *M*A*S*H* was a unique and remarkable television series. Th dark comedy focused on a group of doctors and nurses in the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War. Doctors "Hawkeye" Pierce (Alan Alda) and

This iconic signpost is one of three used in the production of *M*A*S*H*. A visual representation of the psychological toll of military service, the sign lists the names and distances of characters' hometowns, a tantalizing promise of one day returning to the comforts of home and family.

"Trapper John" McIntyre (Wayne Rogers) butt heads with the by-the-book yet incompetent Majors Frank Burns (Larry Linville) and Margaret Houlihan (Loretta Swit), with comic relief provided by supporting characters including company clerk "Radar" O'Reilly (Gary Burghoff), Father Francis Mulcahy (William Christopher), and Corporal Maxwell Q. Klinger (Jamie Farr), known for wearing women's clothing in an attempt to earn a psychiatric discharge.

Series cocreator and lead writer Larry Gelbart wanted to create a new kind of comedy series; inspired by Norman Lear's sociopolitical commentary in shows like *All in the Family* as well as the haunting Johnny Mandel theme song "Suicide Is Painless," Gelbart wanted *M*A*S*H* to be both provocative and moving, "comedy written in a minor key."[55] The series was celebrated for its realism, with period costumes and props and great attention to medical and military detail, its emotional resonance, its groundbreaking pseudo-documentary experimentation, and its memorable and beloved characters. As symbolized by the show's iconic signpost, *M*A*S*H* demonstrated war's broad and unforgiving impact on Americans from all walks of life and from coast to coast. Characters hailed from diverse hometowns including Ottumwa, Iowa (Radar), Crabapple Cove, Maine (Hawkeye), Mill Valley, California (B. J. Honeycutt), Boston's Beacon Hill (Charles Emerson Winchester III), and Toledo, Ohio (Klinger).

It also delved, like no television series had before, into war's psychological toll on its participants, demonstrating the traumatic experiences of doctors treating grievously wounded soldiers in the aftermath of battle. Unusual for a television sitcom of the era, sequences set in the hospital operating room—and sometimes, entire episodes—were shown without laugh tracks. Patients died, in some cases because the doctors were overwhelmed by the number of casualties fl oding the hospital. In one episode, a main character is even killed in a military accident. *M*A*S*H* also depicted the attempts doctors and staff of the 4077th made to cope with the stress and trauma they faced, using drinking, womanizing, gambling, and gallows humor to try to stay sane.

Th oughout the series run, *M*A*S*H* refl cted the breakdown of civic consensus about the Cold War and the use of military force to project U.S. power. The most militaristic and moralistic characters, especially Frank Burns with his sense of purpose in defeating global communism, are

Lavishly illustrated with 296 color images

Funny Stuff

How Comedy Shaped American History

EDITED BY LAURA LAPLACA AND RYAN LINTELMAN
FOREWORD BY MEL BROOKS

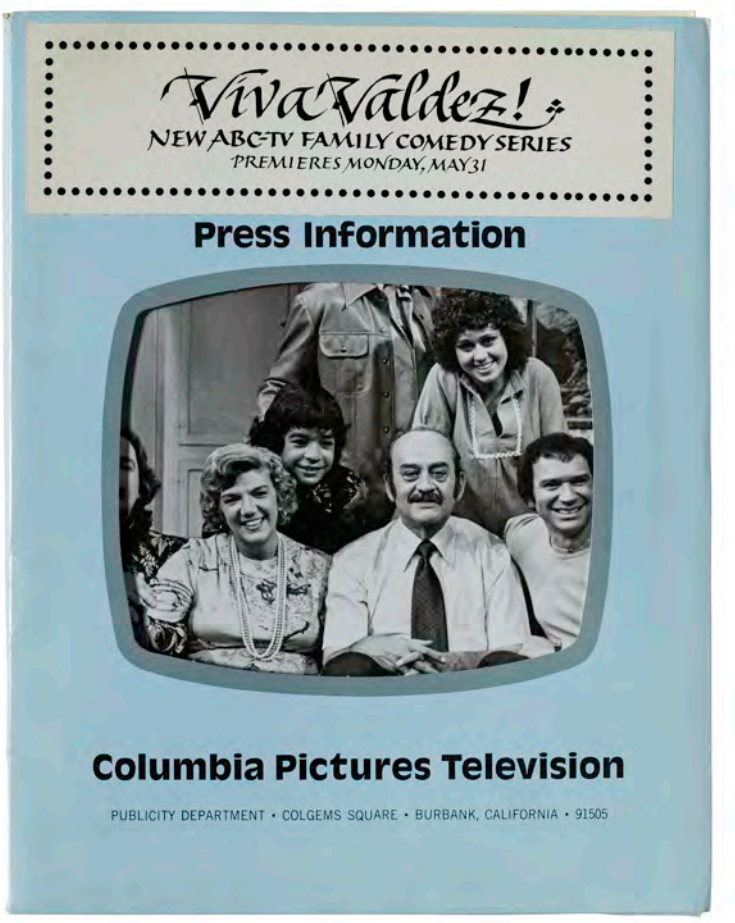
"A one-of-a-kind trip through the archives of the National Comedy Center and Smithsonian Institution that shines a new light on America's funniest moments."
—Carol Burnett

The Smithsonian Institution and the National Comedy Center hold unparalleled collections of objects that illustrate the vitality and importance of comedy in American life, from 19th century vaudeville, minstrel, and puppet shows to stand-up comedians, television satire, and internet memes. Now, for the first time, these incredible collections will be shown in vibrant photographs and illuminating essays that tell the story of how comedy shaped American history.

This accessible, comprehensive history—written by historians from Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Comedy Center—transports readers behind the scenes to see beloved and rarely exhibited artifacts while learning the stories of famous, infamous, and unknown comics and their influence on the nation's culture. Perfect for comedy fans, pop culture aficionados, history lovers, and anyone who has ever laughed at a viral video, this dynamic work offers a new perspective on American history and who we are as a nation through the lens of comedy.

LAURA LAPLACA is the founding director of the National Comedy Center's archive in Jamestown, New York, the United States' congressionally-designated home for the preservation of comedy history. She holds a PhD from Northwestern University and has published, taught, and presented about American popular culture for over 15 years.

RYAN LINTELMAN is the curator of entertainment at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and is one of the curators of the landmark exhibition "Entertainment Nation." He contributed essays to Smithsonian Books' *Entertainment Nation* (2022) and *Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection* (2013).



Left to Right

Desi Arnaz straw hat. Desi Arnaz blazed a trail in the entertainment industry behind the scenes and on-screen. Much of the popularity of the *I Love Lucy* show can be attributed to Desi Arnaz's production genius. As a producer and industry executive, he innovated television with the concept of reruns, the use of multiple cameras for sitcoms, as well as recording the shows live in front of a studio audience.

Credit line: National Comedy Center courtesy of Desilu, too, LLC

Fonzie's jacket. The epitome of cool, Henry Winkler wore this leather jacket as Arthur Fonzarelli on *Happy Days*. Originally intended as a side character, "the Fonz" instead became the show's most popular. He shared characteristics with some of the other macho, ethnic, working class White heroes of the era like Rocky Balboa, John Travolta's Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back, Kotter* or Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, gift of Paramount Television Productions, catalog number 1980.0094.01.

Top Row (Left to Right):

Comedians from Will Rogers to Stephen Colbert have waged farcical presidential campaigns to satirize American political culture. On a 1968 television special that aired in the middle of a tumultuous presidential campaign season, Bob Hope portrayed candidate Gaylord Goodfellow, who drops out of the race to become a ukelele-playing hippie, forcing his advisers to draft lookalike cab driver Irving (also played by Hope) to secretly take his place on the campaign trail.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, catalog number 2017.3021.034.

George Carlin joke file.

Credit: National Comedy Center courtesy of Kelly Carlin

Bottom Row

Viva Valdez press kit. *Viva Valdez* was a briefly-lived sitcom that aired on ABC from May 31 to September 6, 1976. Created by Bernard Rothman, Jack Wohl, and Stan Jacobson, the show told the story of the Mexican-American Valdez family of East Los Angeles, California.

Credit line: National Museum of American History, gift of Ashley Oliva Mayor, catalog number 2023.0103.03.

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