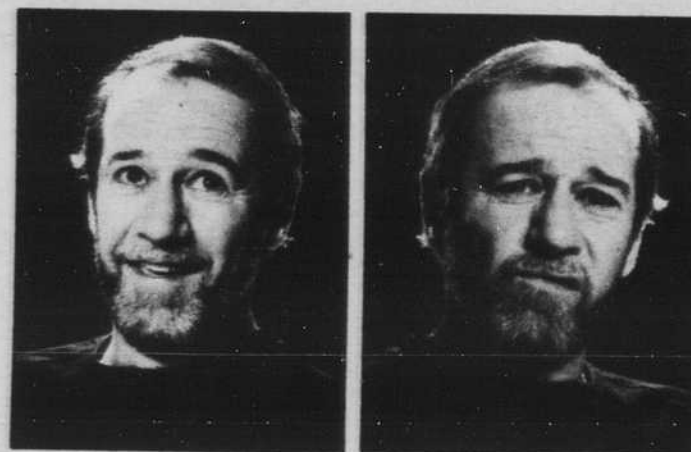


# GEORGE CARLIN: STILL SANE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS



BY RICHARD LEVINSON

George Carlin is sitting in a director's chair in a Los Angeles photography studio, mugging for the camera. "Hey, Jerry, Brenda, c'mon you guys, you gotta say some stuff that'll really make me laugh," Carlin says to his wife of twenty years and his longtime friend (now personal manager) Jerry Hamza. "What're the seven deadly sins?" asks Carlin.

"Greed," answers Hamza. Carlin's face suddenly becomes very greedy. Click. One frame.

"Try pride." Pride. Click. Not quite.

"Nah, that was really more disdain, wasn't it?" says Carlin.

"Lust." Ahhh, lust. Carlin's face grabs lust and holds it in a strangle-lock for three frames. He's got lust down.

"Great, great. How about anger?" suggests Hamza.

"Anger? Oh, yeah, but I can't do that one. It takes too much out of you."

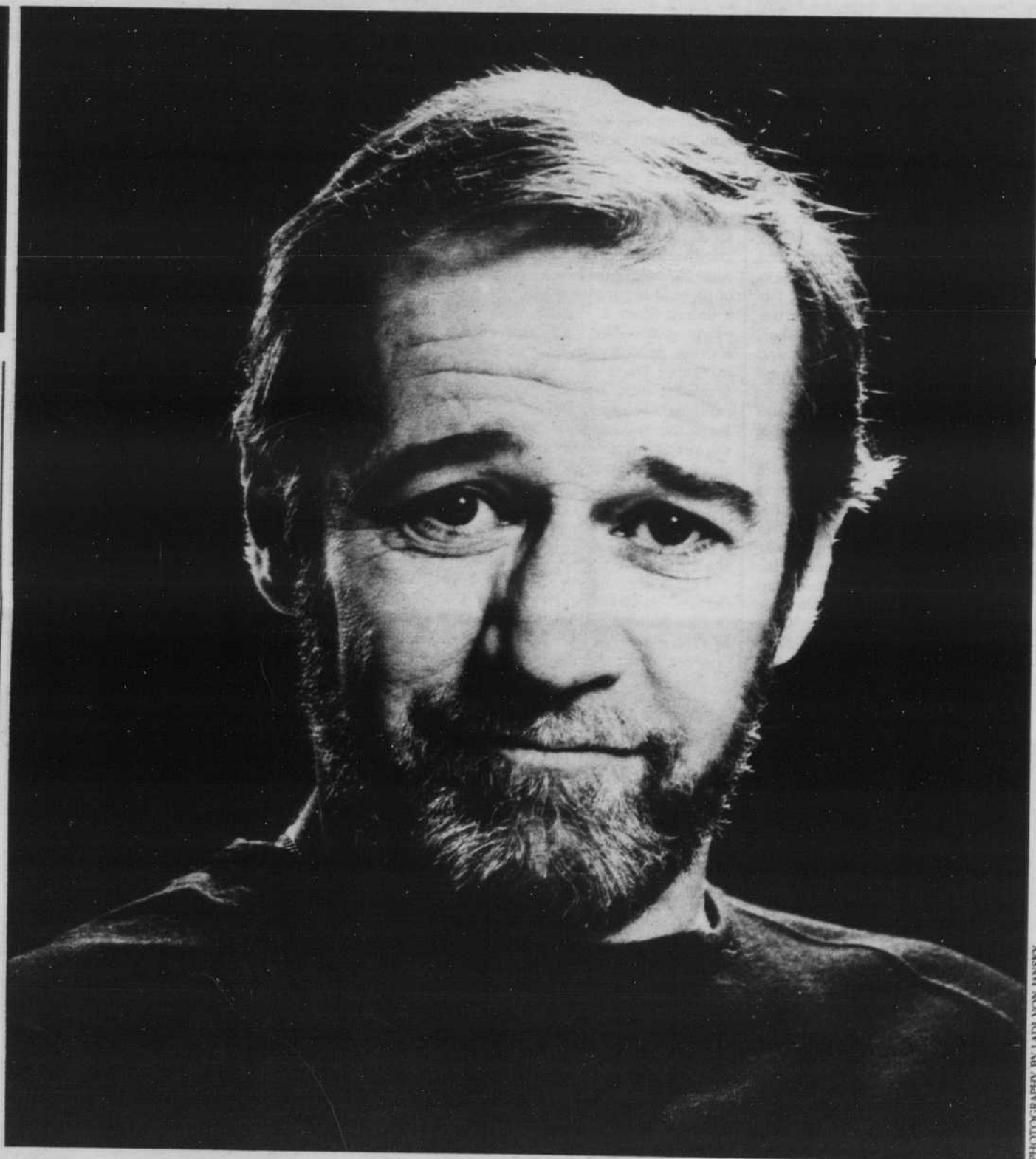
"I think lust is the one," says Hamza.

The photographer calls a break, and Carlin gives his face a rest. The camera, on its own, falls forward on its tripod. "That's the inanimate world responding to me," says Carlin. Hamza starts laughing, then goes over to the telephone to do some business. Hey, where there's a phone, there's an office, right?

These days, there's a lot of business for Hamza to do. After almost five years of relative obscurity for this normally high-profile comedian, George Carlin is back, and back loud. A new album (*A Place for My Stuff*), a *Playboy* interview, plans for books, more records, a cable TV show on HBO ("The biggest budget in the history of cable comedy" says Hamza), more frequent tours and *Tonight Show* appearances ("Do you know who the most popular guest host is?" Hamza knows), and lots and lots of ink bear witness to Carlin's return to the spotlight. But, like everything else in his sometimes turbulent career, this re-emergence is on Carlin's own terms. A brief Carlinography: he achieved some notoriety in the Sixties as a "straight" comic and satirist, known for such bits as "The Indian Sergeant" (which you still hear on airline stereo comedy programs, wedged between Bob Newhart and Phyllis Diller), and for the classic 45 "Wonderful WINO"/"Hippy Dippy Weatherman." He built his Las Vegas price up to \$12,500 per week, but in 1970 left the comfort of the Vegas stage cold. The much retold story of his hasty exit from his straight career says less about censorship, (audiences of conventioners began to take exception to his more controversial act, and the hotel fired him), than it does about Carlin himself. He simply had more he wanted to say than the audience was ready to hear, so it was bye-bye Las Vegas. Carlin began playing colleges in the early Seventies and again achieved success, recording six albums (four gold) as a "counterculture" comedian and as a "social critic," labels that Carlin himself wouldn't use.

"I don't do politics. Basically, I do this for myself. My main priority is to be funny, to get them to say 'God, wasn't that clever,' to satisfy my childhood ego. I talk about what's in your refrigerator, how your dog and cat are different, words you use without noticing what they mean. Beyond that, I have a great us-and-them mentality, which surfaces along with the other stuff. It's another section of my personality. But I don't rely on that. I go out there to be funny."

The mid-Seventies brought a lot of changes, none particularly for the better. Massive cocaine consumption, a heart attack, the pursuit



PHOTOGRAPH BY LAUR VON JANSKY

of a movie that was never to be completed, and years of therapy kept Carlin out of the public eye. He survived: health, wit and, almost as importantly, career intact. That kind of silence might deal a fatal blow to the career of one or another entertainer, but in many ways, Carlin's comeback has been easier than his going away. He attributes this to the professional groundwork he has laid over two successful career phases so far.

"Monologues are the basic thing I do. They always will be. That's the thing that got me from standing behind all the guys on the corner to standing in front. If I'm able to expand and develop other forms of writing and performance, they'll be good for me. But they'll never entirely eclipse that the basic thing I do is think about things, stand up and tell them. Having established over a long period of time that I am someone who can always come back and do that well, I would expect the audience to have full confidence, to be ready for me."

Minding the fine points of coming back is the task of Carlin's professional advisors, headed by Hamza. Forget how Carlin might describe himself in conversation, his most recent image is that of a rubber-limbed, wild-eyed class clown who, as often as not, would

get himself in trouble saying the right thing to the wrong people. Now, his presentation to the public is very neatly sculpted: The official photo on Carlin's press-kit shows a rather mature, intelligent face with a neatly clipped beard, a friendly, amused... benevolent look. Like a cross between a happily tenured college professor and a liberal, socially aware (dare I say it?) priest. The new, grown-up George Carlin.

Although he must have approved of the milder image (nothing in his career gets by him), it doesn't prevent him from saying whatever he feels like at interview time.

"I don't see much hope for this society, maybe even the human race. The [population] segment I identify with is the one that feels, as I do, that it's hopeless. The things I do that are pointedly anti-institution are just my way of name calling, of standing across the street and shaking my fist. So, I do them, and try to make them as funny as possible, so they are entertaining to the segment that doesn't give a [insert one of the seven words you can never say on TV, or print in this magazine]. The trouble is profit. I think the only real hope is to kill about three or four hundred million people, maybe even a billion, and start all over again without cash



registers."

Are the billion on any particular continent? "No, they're all over. You'd have to aim mainly at the financial centers, the commercial centers. I want to be fair. When you're killing that many people, you want to be as fair as possible. It'll be nice, because you'll get a lot of Christians, too."

Carlin doesn't like Christians very much. "Christians have spread more evil than most. I don't like many organized religions, including Judaism. But the Jews have usually been packing and running — it was the Christians doing the chasing."

Is the trouble in the teachings, or are people just reading it wrong?

"You've answered the question. Nothing wrong with the teachings. But you let a couple greedheads get a hold of some gold, and they'll f-k up a good philosophy every time." Carlin adds that this will probably end up as a routine, perhaps as a companion piece to a bit he does on life after the nuclear holocaust.

That's the trouble talking with George Carlin. You never really know if you're hearing the man or the comedian. It's a line Carlin is consciously trying to erase. "I want to get as close to being myself on stage as I can. It's a structured, orderly, professional self, but it's still me. So, the more an audience knows about me personally, the better."

It's this meld of person and comic that makes it possible for Carlin to do his diatribe on Christians, then turn around, go on the *Tonight Show*, do a neat, very funny 10 minutes without a trace of controversy, and feel that, in both cases, he has presented a valid side of himself. ("And now, the news. A man, attempting to walk around the world, drowned today.") There's a lot of death in Carlin's *Tonight Show* material, but death has never been a forbidden subject on television.

"The problem with doing the *Tonight Show* is that so many people see you there that never see you anywhere else. A woman wrote me a letter asking for her \$10 back for the album. She went through such a story, about how she'd loved me on the *Tonight Show*, and played the album for her husband and friends, and got so embarrassed. I sent her the ten. That's not to set a precedent. If it appears in this magazine, I'll just deny it."

"Now, as far as the career goes..." Carlin warms to his favorite subject, his future. It seems that he puts up with, no, encourages the hustling, business side of himself, knowing that the payoff is that he gets paid to do what he loves most and does best: talk. "On the new cable show, I'm going to be doing a lot more characterizations, in costume: Up 'til now, my characters have just been supporting players. Now, I'm going to put them in front. The show will have maybe twenty minutes of monologue, and about forty minutes of sketches, blackouts, vignettes, whatever."

Touring? ("George sold out his last tour.

Added shows in Pittsburgh," says Hamza.)

"Yes, I'm going out soon for 18 days in the East, Midwest, and South."

The album?

"It could have had a better December, but my albums have always had good, solid, steady growth. They sell, they've got legs. And for a first step in a new direction, it's doing magnificently."

Legs? Such a showbiz term for this anti-showbiz comedian. But somehow, the paradox never crosses into hypocrisy. No one feeds Carlin his lines. He knows about and oversees every aspect of his career. He's the one making the choices, he's the one taking the decisions. If anyone has to know about the business side, it's going to be George. And characteristically, he's more than willing to talk about it.

"I've been autonomous all my career, all my life. That's done all the things for me that have happened. The fact that I made the choices. When a posture of that type pays off so handsomely, both in personal satisfaction and money, it's harder and harder to pull away and let other people in." But, with the cable show and other "conceptual" projects, other artistic people will have to be involved. "I'm taking it step by step. As long as I'm the person doing the writing and acting, I can have others advise me. I think I can open myself to that now."

The photographer is ready for a few more shots. I ask Carlin how many photo sessions he's had in his career.

"One hundred and fourteen, exactly. Not counting the ones that didn't come out."

As the pictures are snapped, Carlin does a few lings, gentle ones for a man bent on killing a billion people: "Don't you hate it when you wake up at night, and there's a spider crawling on your pillow, and you don't know his name?" Brenda laughs, and Carlin says, "That laugh. After twenty years, that's still what it's all about."

"I want to share the little wonders of the world. Not the big ones, those are in the books. Just the little ones. I'm afraid to go out and fight for justice, because I'm afraid it's a losing battle. But I think ideas and comedy can co-exist. You can be relatively smart and still be pretty funny."

As the session winds down, Carlin and Hamza are talking. I walk over with the tape recorder. "Hey, Jerry, better watch that corporate stuff. The recorder's on," Carlin is laughing. Then he adds, apparently in reference to their discussion, *Time-Life*. The two things they know nothing about, they use as their name."

Now everyone is laughing, a sound familiar to Carlin. I ask him if he has anything he'd like to add before he takes off. He's got an answer ready. After 114 photo sessions and years of interviews, you better believe he's got an answer ready. Still, he sounds like he means it.

"I'm happy, and I'm looking forward to whatever happens to me next."

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