

Comedian Jerry Lewis knew how to laugh, cry

By HILLEL ITALIE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Jerry Lewis sometimes didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"There's nothing more dramatic than the comedy I've done," Lewis, who died Sunday at age 91, told The Associated Press in 2016. "Because the comedy I've done is to get to the audience, get them to feel it, or they won't laugh."

If jokes are the children of pain, then Lewis was a born patriarch. The filmmaker, entertainer and sleepless host of the Muscular Dystrophy telethons was a storm system of rage and ecstasy, Olympian physical talent, artistic aspiration and vintage Vegas schmalz. The crazed funnyman who would scream like a toddler worked on a Holocaust film called "The Day the Clown Cried" and for his theme song chose the self-mythology of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone":

*Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be
tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk
alone*

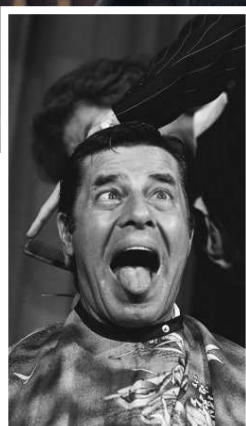
Some comedians are always in character. Don Rickles, who died in April, stayed true in public to his persona of good-natured insulter. With Lewis, you never knew when he might switch from sad to funny to angry to reflective. He might lash out an audience member during one of his nightclub performances or chastise a gathering at the Friars Club in New York for not cheering loud enough for one his fellow entertainers. He might glare in response to a reporter's question, give a long and thoughtful response or tell an unprintable joke.

Lewis believed in truth,



DAN STEINBERG/INVISION

Actor and comedian Jerry Lewis poses during an interview at TCL Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles in 2014. Lewis, the comedian and director whose fundraising telethons became as famous as his hit movies, died Sunday. He was 91.



AP PHOTO/PHIL SANDLIN
Comedian Jerry Lewis cuts up during a haircut for the Muscular Dystrophy Association in 1977.

and part of his truth was darkness. He once bragged that he told gossip columnist Louella Parsons she was "a fat pig."

"You see the people that have a point of view, and have an opinion and have some intellect are dangerous in the film community, they're dangerous," he told Larry King during a 2000 interview on CNN. "You want to know why Barbra Streisand is so difficult? Because she's brilliant. She's a brilliant entertainer, she's a brilliant lady, and she's a wonderful human being, and the community doesn't like it."

Lewis was born into a world of vaudeville and silent movies and carried with him decades of 20th century show business. He was a final link to the old Borsch Belt culture that also turned out Mel Brooks and Henny Youngman, to the nightclub circuit where entertainers such as himself, Frank Sinatra and his old partner Dean Martin got their starts, and to the early years of Las Vegas when Lewis helped shape the city's brand of glitz and sentimentality.

Lewis was equally memorable talking too much or saying nothing. As the French seemed to know better than anyone, he was among the last comedians who modeled their work after Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the greats of the silent era. Like the early masters, he was the sole author of his best work, serving as star, writer, director and producer of "The Nutty Professor," "The Bellboy,"

"The Patsy" and other films. His most memorable routines had a near-martial precision, whether in "The Errand Boy" when he points a cigar to the beat of Count Basie's "Blues in Hoss Flat" or his mimicry of a typewriter in "Who's Minding the Store?"

He knew well how to suffer, but also called himself "the luckiest Jew in the world" and liked to say that happiness was family. Also work and recognition, knowing he would always be spotted in a crowd. He also loved the admiration of peers and the bad taste of their compliments. When he celebrated his 90th birthday at the Friars, friends such as Richard Belzer, Gilbert Gottfried and Robert Klein turned up to wish him well, remind of his age and make fun of his sex life. Jim Carrey had a final message for his hero.

"He's 90!" Carrey called out. "He can still disappoint us!"

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