

American comic writer and performer Carl Reiner, 1922-2020

Making “fun of the people higher on the totem pole”

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Carl Reiner, the remarkable comic personality, writer and performer, died at his home in Beverly Hills, California on Monday at 98.

Reiner may not be a name recognizable to many under a certain age, but his influence and impact on American comedy and performance in the postwar period was considerable.

In the 1950s, he wrote for and performed on two legendary television variety programs, *Your Show of Shows* (1950-1954) and *Caesar's Hour* (1954-1957), both featuring comic Sid Caesar. Writers for the two series and later Caesar ventures included, in addition to Reiner, Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen, Selma Diamond and, eventually, Larry Gelbart and Woody Allen.

Reiner subsequently created, produced, co-wrote and performed in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), an immensely influential series based loosely on his years as a comedy writer. Van Dyke played a writer, married to Mary Tyler Moore, working for a temperamental star played by Reiner and living in New York City's suburbs.

Reiner's teaming up with his great friend Brooks to perform variations of the “2,000 Year Old Man” routine was another of his memorable achievements. The pair made numerous recordings of the sketches in the 1960s, which won awards and a huge number of admirers.

As a film director, Reiner had mixed success, directing 15 films between 1966 and 1997, including an adaptation of his own autobiographical novel and stage play, *Enter Laughing* (1967), *Oh, God!* (1977) with George Burns and several films with Steve Martin (*The Jerk*, *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, *The Man with Two Brains* and *All of Me*) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. *Fatal Instinct* (1993), Reiner's parody of the “erotic thriller” genre (*Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*), with more than a hint of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, with Armand Assante, Sherilyn Fenn, Kate Nelligan and Sean Young, has some genuinely comic moments.

Much later in life, in a new century, Reiner appeared in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven*, *Twelve* and *Thirteen*.

Reiner was born in the Bronx, New York City in 1922. His parents were Jewish immigrants—his mother Bessie from

Romania and his father Irving from Austria.

In one of his amusing memoirs (*I Remember Me*), of which he wrote several, Reiner recalled his father: “Irving Reiner made his living as a watchmaker and, for diversion, played the violin and flute. He was self-taught and mastered both instruments well enough to perform regularly in amateur symphony orchestras—all this before he married my mother.” His father had his workbench in the family's living room.

After graduating from Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, Reiner first went to work repairing sewing machines. When his older brother told him about a free acting class being offered by the Works Progress Administration, one of the New Deal programs, his fate as an entertainer was apparently sealed. After serving in the US Army during World War II as part of a traveling unit of performers, Reiner appeared in several Broadway musicals and eventually played the lead role in *Call Me Mister*, which opened in 1946.

The Depression and fascist threat radicalized many in that period. As far as one is aware, Reiner never acknowledged his encounter with left-wing politics, but one can obtain a glimpse of it by reading between some of his lines.

In another of his memoirs, *My Anecdotal Life*, Reiner describes the last summer he spent in the US before joining the military. He locates himself in 1942 at “Allaben Acres, an adult summer camp somewhere in the Berkshires.” In fact, “Allaben Acres,” or simply Allaben, is in New York State, in the Catskill and not the Berkshire Mountains. It was the location of Camp Unity, the Communist Party-sponsored holiday resort.

Reiner recounts doing “a dramatic reading from Richard Wright's play, *Native Son*,” and another time, singing a baritone solo in Earl Robinson's “Ballad for Americans.” Again, this underscores the leftist political character of the “adult summer camp.”

One of his more remarkable memories of this summer involves reading all of Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, to jazz great Sidney Bechet and members of his band during a thunderstorm! Reiner notes, “I had never had a more attentive or appreciative audience in my young career.”

According to an online obituary, as a member of the

American Labor Party, a CP-influenced body, “Reiner emceed a 1947 charity event for veterans of the Spanish civil war at Carnegie Hall. It was at the height of McCarthyism, and the FBI sent two agents to ask if Reiner might name communists.” He later made light of the episode, explaining that he “politely refused, telling the agents ‘Communist actors don’t go around telling you that they’re communists.’”

Reiner began working for Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows*, a live, weekly 90-minute variety show on NBC, in 1950. Working in American network television at the time, at the height of the “Red Scare,” was incompatible with publicly held radical or socialist views. Like many other members of his generation, Reiner either shifted his opinion under conditions of the Cold War and the pressures of official anticommunism, or, which perhaps amounts to the same thing, simply accommodated and adjusted himself over the years until he was nothing more than a Democratic Party liberal.

In any event, Reiner poured as much of his deeper and better feelings as he could, including social anger, into comedy. Caesar and his colleagues (Howard Morris, Imogene Coca, Nanette Fabray, Reiner), at their best, offered a manic take on various aspects of American society in the 1950s, in sketches and skits that often went on too long, but whose frenetic pace and energy had an out of control and liberating character. The show became popular with audiences: it was rated no. 4 in 1950-51, no. 8 in 1951-52 and no. 18 in 1952-53. *Caesar’s Hour*, an hour-long, live, sketch-comedy program (some of the sketches ran as long as half an hour), was also a success with the public. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* was a cooler, cannier affair, but it was sharply and cleverly written and put together. It also had the benefit of the presence of Van Dyke and Moore, two disarming and charming comic performers. The series smacked of the relaxation in the social climate following the end of the McCarthyite purges and the Eisenhower years.

Gerald Nachman, in *Seriously Funny, The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, provides this account of the origins of the “2,000 Year Old Man” character. Brooks explained that at some point in the 1950s, Reiner “brought in a new tape recorder. Just to try it out he made up this thing. He said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, there’s a man here who claims to be two thousand years old. He says he was actually at the site of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Sir?’ And he turns to me, knowing that I would give him something, and I said, ‘Oh, it was a terrible t’ing,’ and he said, ‘Did you know any of his followers?’ I said, ‘Sure, dey all came in deh store, and dey never bought anyt’ing! You can’t make a living from t’ese apostles.’”

What began primarily as a few minutes of entertainment at private parties became a national phenomenon. Reiner would ask, for example, “Sir, did you know Joan of Arc?” “Know her? I went with her, dummy!” “How did you feel about her being burned at the stake?” “Terrible.” As Joan of Arc’s boyfriend, he told her, “I’m gonna wash up. You save France.”

Nachman writes: “The 2,000 Year Old Man is the perfect open-ended sketch and a textbook example of the art of fifties and sixties improvisation—even if the finished recordings were edited from several performances before invited audiences. The routine relies totally on the team’s mental agility and chemistry. It’s almost heresy to imagine Brooks performing it with any other straight man. Reiner was a solid straight man to Caesar, but with Brooks he is the second-banana supreme—egging on the feisty little egomaniacal Jewish bimillennarian, cutting him off when he’s run out of jokes, smoothly shifting to a new subject that piques his interest. Reiner became the subtle rudder, guiding his partner’s churning comic mind. Without batting an eyelash, and with a continuous air of respect, curiosity, and fascination, Reiner feeds and nourishes his partner’s deadpan hunger.”

In early 2020, a *Guardian* reporter asked Brooks and Reiner, whose health was obviously failing, why did they think so many comedians were—and are—Jewish. Reiner provided an answer that speaks to more than the presence of Jewish comedians, it speaks to what creates enduring comedy, an element so often lacking in much contemporary comedy: “I think Jews were naturally funny because they were low on the totem pole, so they made fun of the people higher on the pole.”

Various comics and performers weighed in after Reiner’s death, expressing their appreciation of his life and sadness at his death, including longtime friend Brooks, Van Dyke, Alan Alda, Billy Crystal, Bette Midler, Albert Brooks, Sarah Silverman and Ed Asner.



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