

Comedian and musician Tom Smothers dies at 86: A victim of government and corporate censorship in the late 1960s

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Tom Smothers died last week, on the day after Christmas. The comedian and folk musician was 86. He died of causes related to cancer. Smothers and his brother Dick performed as a duo for some 60 years. Their act ostensibly centered on performing folk songs, but they developed a humorous patter rooted in sibling rivalry early on in their joint career, which established them as a comedy act.

In the late 1960s, Tom Smothers demonstrated an anti-establishment streak, in relation not only to the Vietnam War but other social issues, which led CBS executives, in April 1969, to cancel *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a popular and influential prime-time weekly program, at the end of its third season. Although they eventually prevailed in a lawsuit against the television network, the brothers never regained their position in the national limelight. They demonstrated principle and paid the economic and career price.

In light of the various efforts at present to suppress widespread opposition to the policies of both parties, and in particular protests against the homicidal Israeli onslaught in Gaza, funded and fully endorsed by the White House, it is worth recalling that a willingness to launch fierce attacks on freedom of speech and democratic rights runs freely in the veins of the American ruling elite. The threat that a message of resistance to official policy will reach broad layers of the population has always especially terrified the powers that be in the US. At various points in the 20th century, and now in the 21st, the government, in close alliance with big business, has launched vicious campaigns against performers and other figures who defy what is proclaimed to be the “national consensus.”

Tom (born 1937) and Dick Smothers (born 1938) at first glance would seem to have been unlikely candidates for political iconoclasm.

Their father, a career soldier, was killed in the last days of World War II, while a prisoner of war of the Japanese, apparently by “friendly fire.” His POW ship was mistakenly bombed by Allied pilots en route from the Philippines to Korea. Their mother, according to author David Bianculli, in *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,”* “was in and out of rehab and state hospitals, leaving her children with others as she tried, with little success, to conquer her alcoholism.” The family (including a sister) lived in southern California.

The brothers began performing together as a duo in 1960. Their influences were Burl Ives, the Kingston Trio, the Limelites and other relatively innocuous acts. They intended to be straightforward folk singers, but feared they lacked the necessary musical skills. What eventually made them different was Tom’s nervous, obviously fictitious introductions to various songs, his generally mischievous or sometimes frightened demeanor, and the conflicts that inevitably arose between the brothers. They discovered an ability to improvise, and the naturalness of the comic friction between them rapidly attracted audiences.

Repeated appearances on *The Jack Paar Show* (officially *The Tonight*

Show), starting in January 1961, made them nationally prominent figures. A *New York Times* review in 1961 observed that “Tom’s foolery reflects the speech pattern of a frightened tenth-grader giving a memorized talk at a Kiwanis meeting,” while Dick’s “cherubic look suggests that he may have just won a Boy Scout merit badge for bass-playing.”

The brothers were featured in a situation comedy, *The Smothers Brothers Show*, which lasted only one season, 1965-66, on CBS. Tom fought with executives of the production company.

He was determined to wield more “creative control” in the brothers’ next television venture, a variety series, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, which was aired on Sunday nights at 9:00 p.m. starting in February 1967, against one of the most popular programs on network television, the long-running Western, *Bonanza*.

The show’s 71 episodes appeared in the midst of highly explosive political and social events, including major inner-city riots; the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy; the eruption of mass protests against the Vietnam War and the various bloody battles and campaigns of that conflict, including the Tet Offensive; the decision by Lyndon B. Johnson not to run again for the presidency; the brutal police attacks on protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention; and many others. Globally, of course, this was a period of upheaval with revolutionary implications, in Western Europe, Latin America and elsewhere.

To their credit, the Smothers Brothers, unlike most of the television personalities of the time, had the audacity to bring many of these events, and individuals with something to say about them, onto their program.

A number of “controversial” decisions led to a state of almost continuous warfare with CBS executives. One of the most memorable was the decision to invite veteran left-wing folk singer Pete Seeger to perform during the second season of the *Comedy Hour*. Seeger had been blacklisted on prime time US television for 17 years after being listed in *Red Channels*, which “identified individuals and organizations it claimed had affiliations with, or sympathy for, the Communist Party. This publication (by *Counterattack* magazine, ‘the newsletter of facts to combat Communism,’ started by three former FBI agents) fed the communist witch hunts and gave ammunition to Republican senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin” (*Dangerously Funny*).

Not only was Seeger scheduled to appear, but he planned to sing his new composition, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” a song, although set in World War II, that was an obvious reference to the ongoing Vietnam War and the role of Lyndon Johnson in prosecuting it. As David Bianculli explains, “The sixth and final stanza was the one that made CBS brass the most apoplectic. ‘Every time I read the papers,’ Seeger sang, ‘that old feeling comes on—we’re waist deep in the Big Muddy, and the big fool says to push on.’ Seeger was singing this five weeks after Johnson had

committed more troops to Vietnam, and CBS found it unacceptable.” CBS excised the song from the show, on a night when more than one in five US households tuned in to see Seeger sing.

Five months later, in February 1968, Seeger returned to the program, sang “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” and CBS raised no objections. As Bianculli notes, Tom Smothers had kept up a steady campaign against the act of censorship, but attitudes toward the Vietnam War, including attitudes within sections of the media and political establishment, had shifted. Also on CBS, only two days after Seeger’s second appearance, longtime news anchor Walter Cronkite appeared in a special and argued that “it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate” and that more troops would not affect the probable outcome.

The Smothers Brothers also aroused the ire of CBS by opening their third season, in September 1968, with an appearance by Harry Belafonte, another veteran radical performer, with his own history of association with the Communist Party, or its artistic periphery. In one of his segments on the program, Belafonte sang “a calypso medley built around ‘Don’t Stop the Carnival,’ written originally about the frenzied madness of a Mardi Gras celebration, but with new lyrics added to refer to the Democratic National Convention [one month earlier]—as footage from the convention, and of police dragging and arresting protesters outside the hall, is projected behind him.” Chicago Mayor Richard Daley was clearly shown “in clips that were, to put it lightly, not at all flattering” (*Dangerously Funny*).

CBS officials on both the West and East Coast were adamant in their refusal to broadcast the number. A bitter conflict between Tom Smothers and the CBS hierarchy erupted. The season premiere was broadcast without the Belafonte “Carnival” sequence. Adding insult to injury, CBS sold some five minutes of the space created by their censorship to the Republican Party as a campaign spot for presidential candidate Richard Nixon.

Conflicts between the brothers, Tom in particular, and CBS raged throughout the third and final season. Continued and sustained criticism of the Vietnam quagmire, mockery of religion (featuring comic David Steinberg), attacks on police brutality, references to interracial relationships, double entendres about drug use and sexuality and, as a new feature, the “skewering” of Nixon (including “an Arthurian-era tale,” Bianculli comments, with Sir Richard of Nixon, also known as “Tricky Dicky,” that probably “put the Smothers Brothers on Nixon’s radar”), all of this only added fuel to the fire.

The Smothers Brothers also made an effort to present music which young people were listening to. Among the groups and individuals who appeared on the program were George Harrison, Buffalo Springfield, Cream, the Who, Donovan, the Doors, Janis Ian, Jefferson Airplane, Peter, Paul and Mary, Steppenwolf, Simon and Garfunkel, Ray Charles and Ike and Tina Turner.

An appearance by folk singer Joan Baez produced another bitter dispute between Tom Smothers and corporate headquarters. Baez introduced a song by explaining that it was dedicated to her husband, David Harris, who was “going to be going to prison, probably in June, and he’ll be there for three years.” The reason he was going, she continued, “is because he refused to have anything to do with the draft, or selective service, or whatever you want to call it—militarism in general.”

CBS, under newly installed president Robert Wood, butchered Baez’s appearance, cutting out her explanation of the reasons for Harris being sentenced to prison.

In the end, on April 4, 1969, CBS used the fact that the Smothers brothers had not provided executives and affiliates a videotape version of an upcoming show in time for them to make changes and cuts as an excuse for firing them. Murray Kempton in the *New York Post*, Bianculli writes, “saluted the bravery of the brothers in bringing on guests Pete

Seeger and Joan Baez, and quoted Tom’s self-effacing but accurate assessment of the blandness of 1960s television: ‘We stand out,’ Kempton quoted Tom as saying, ‘because nothing else is being said. We’d be moderates anywhere else.’”

The political and social stakes were high. The urban riots, mass protests over Vietnam and unrest on college campuses and a major strike wave in major industries, in addition to the specter of revolution in France and other parts of the world, terrified the American ruling class. It should be remembered that the Smothers Brothers and their social commentary, in a different technological and media universe, were being viewed by between 30 to 35 million people a week. The show was one of the top five American television series most watched by people under 35. The satirical and other attacks, “moderate” as they may have been, were unacceptable.

Bianculli acknowledges that there is no “smoking gun” connecting the White House to the demise of the Smothers Brothers program, but there is considerable circumstantial evidence, including Nixon’s general vindictiveness, his drawing up of an “enemies list” and his determination to eliminate critics in artistic and academic circles.

In 1973, Bianculli points out, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* exposed the fact that a former New York City policeman had been hired to conduct more than 20 “secret probes” between 1969 and 1971 ordered by the White House and instigated by Watergate co-conspirators H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. One of the targets was the Smothers Brothers.

Tom Smothers refused to back down in face of the effort to suppress the series. He never apologized or exhibited repentance. He and his brother continued to perform as a duo for decades. In December 2022, the brothers announced that they would tour in 2023.

On a 1988 reunion show, they sang, to the tune of “Those Were the Days,” new lyrics written for the occasion by Mason Williams: “Once upon a time we were on TV / Every Sunday night we knocked ‘em dead / We stirred up trouble, so the network fired us / I guess that it was something that we said / Those were the days, my friends . . .”

In 2008, Steve Martin—one of the writers on the brothers’ *Comedy Hour*—presented Tom Smothers with an Emmy award for writing on the 1968-69 series. (Smothers had excluded his name from the list of writers submitted for the award that year because he was afraid it was “too volatile”.)

Smothers told the audience, clearly referring to the Bush administration and the Iraq war, “It’s hard for me to stay silent when I keep hearing that peace is only attainable through war—and there’s nothing more scary than watching ignorance in action. I dedicate this Emmy,” he continued, “to all people who feel compelled to speak out, and are not afraid to speak to power, and won’t shut up, and refuse to be silenced.”



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