

SERIOUSLY FUNNY

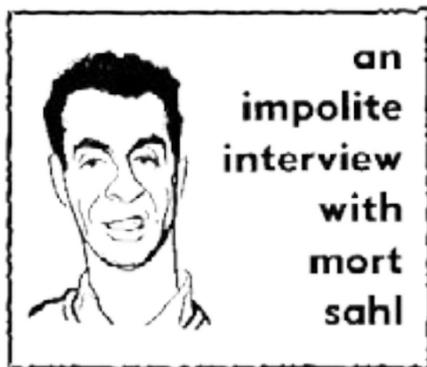
Before Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, there was **Mort Sahl**. Over lunch, *Michael Adams* finds the still-working 84-year-old comic legend as feisty as ever as he discusses JFK, Woody Allen, modern comedy and the need for love.

A good indicator of how well Mort Sahl is remembered is found in the Haight-Ashbury branch of Amoeba Music. Even in San Francisco, you'd be hard pressed to find a more counter-cultural outpost, and indeed the world-famous hipster record store's comedy section bursts with back catalogue CDs by celebrated American agents provocateurs such as Lenny Bruce, the Smothers Brothers, Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks and George Carlin. What you won't find is a single CD by Mort Sahl. But if you're lucky, which I am this drizzly winter's afternoon, you might pick up some of his decades-old LPs. Don't think they're collector's items: second-hand prices start at a measly \$2.99.

As I take an armful of vinyl up to the cashier, I ponder what a strange fate this is for the man who invented modern American comedy and political satire, not least because he made the first-ever stand-up album. Stranger still because it's not like Sahl has shuffled off this mortal coil. Not only is he alive and kicking but the man is still performing. In fact, Sahl's doing a show a few nights from now at a small theatre in Mill Valley, his new home across the other side of San Francisco Bay. I've got a ticket near the front. Even better, we're having lunch tomorrow.

Robert W. Kelley/Time Life Picture/Getty Images

Mort Sahl, shot for *Time* magazine.



**an
impolite
interview
with
mort
sahl**

To understand Sahl's significance, as well as how he came to pass into near anonymity, it's necessary to set the dials on the Wayback Machine for two similar sounding dates that are separated by almost exactly a decade.

**DECEMBER
22
1953**

Nervous comic try-out

Mort Sahl takes to the stage of the hungry i nightclub in the San Francisco suburb of North Beach for the very first time. The 26-year-old wears

a preppy sweater instead of the comedian's usual uniform of a tuxedo. Much more unusual though is that while the stand-up's stock-in-trade is mother-in-law one-liners, Sahl soon starts riffing from the headlines of the newspaper he carries under one arm, doing routines about politics that digress and build in the manner of jazz. More astoundingly, this guy from LA, with his staccato patter, rallying-cry demeanour and natural assumption that his audience aren't idiots, even has the balls to take direct aim at Red-hunting Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. At the time, that's a dangerously un-American activity.

Sahl not only survives the occasional "Communist!" catcall guys waiting outside to beat him up, he becomes a hit with college kids and bohemians. These are the new self-

styled "intellectuals" and he'll come to refer to them as "his people". They're the same crowd who are snapping their fingers to LPs by the Dave Brubeck Quartet and itching to rebel like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. Some are furtively glancing at pictures of Marilyn Monroe in the debut issue of Hugh Hefner's racy new magazine *Playboy*.

Though the hungry i – the 'i' stands for 'intellectual' is a cave-like venue, Sahl's far from an underground act. Soon he's earning \$1,000 a week. Then it's \$5,000. It's not long before he's friends with Brubeck and Brando, Hefner and Monroe. Hollywood celebrities like Eddie Cantor, Danny Kaye and Burgess Meredith come to see him and his newspaper, as do influential media figures like columnist Herb Caen and newsman Walter Kronkite.

In 1954, Sahl hits the road, becoming the first comedian to tour college campuses, which he does with Brubeck. In New York, a young no-one named Woody Allen sees Sahl play at The Blue Angel and is so inspired he decides he, too, will become a comedian. In 1955, a bootleg recording of a Sahl show called *At Sunset* is released. Though unauthorised, it will, in the far off time of April 2011, be admitted to the Library Of Congress for its distinction of being the first-ever recording of modern stand-up comedy. In late 1957, Sahl records his first official comedy record, the drily but far from incorrectly titled *Mort Sahl, Iconoclast – The Future Lies Ahead*.

That future rushes towards him. He signs on for a four-week gig at Crescendo nightclub in Los Angeles. His run ends 88 weeks later, by which time he's met everyone. Now he's best friends with Paul Newman and is best man at the actor's January 1958 marriage to Joanne Woodward. When Sahl

does a show in New York City, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor make a big deal to the press about going to see him.

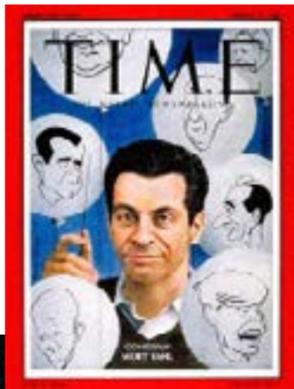
Having split with his first wife, Sue, in 1957, Sahl is free to live the dream imagined by *Playboy's* readers. He buys sports cars, expensive watches and new-fangled stereo equipment, and he romances babes like Phyllis Kirk and Tippi Hedren and Gloria Steinem, pre-feminist fame. With Dizzy Gillespie, he emcees the first Monterey Jazz Festival in 1958, whose headliners are Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. Sahl fronts the Oscars in April 1959, a political satirist ranked as worthy of his co-hosts Jerry Lewis, Bob Hope, Tony Randall and Sir Laurence Olivier. The next month he flies solo as host of the first Grammy Awards.

He releases more LPs, including *Mort Sahl 1960 – Look Forward In Anger and The Next President*, so-called because he's often introduced to his adoring audiences as "the next president of the Unites States." That can't happen, of course, because when Sahl entered the world on May 11, 1927, it was in Montreal, Quebec. Damn that constitution's 'natural born' requirement! But to use one of Sahl's snappy catchphrases: "Anyway... onward."

Onward to the next best thing to political power – political influence. On August 15, 1960, *Time* magazine puts Sahl on the cover, just a few months shy of the presidential election.

The cover's centrepiece has his solidly handsome colour portrait gazing knowingly at the reader from amid floating balloons bearing simple-line caricatures of White House wannabes John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as the incumbent team of Commander-in-Chief Dwight D. Eisenhower and his veep Richard M. Nixon.

The article is called 'The Third Campaign' and it depicts Sahl as a self-invented stand-up force of nature who's equally contemptuous of both the left and right and



whose intellectual bent has inspired a new breed of comedians, among them Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Bob Newhart and Lenny Bruce.

While Sahl snipes from the outside he's also becoming something of an insider. Adlai Stevenson, the governor of Illinois and two-time Democratic nominee for President, has been a friend and fan since Sahl played Mister Kelly's in Chicago for 31 weeks early in his rise. But Sahl has an even newer admirer. Visiting a friend in New York in mid-1960, he takes an unexpected phone call. "This is Ambassador Joseph Kennedy," says the voice on the other end. "I understand that you're pre-eminent in the field of political humour. I want you to write something for Johnny."

Sahl agrees to write for Senator John F. Kennedy. He even contributes anti-Eisenhower jokes via telegram from the Montana set of his first movie, *All The Young Men*. When

shooting on the war epic continues back on the Columbia lot, Sahl emcees a dinner at the Beverly Hilton for Kennedy, who's in California to ask for the Democratic party's delegation votes. The two men click and become friends.

But as Kennedy is well aware, his new buddy has gotten some big laughs with lines like, "Some people claim Nixon is trying to sell the country, and Kennedy is trying to buy it." Sahl serves notice on his new friend: if Kennedy makes it to the White House, he won't back off from cracking wise about him. The young presidential candidate appears to accept.

On November 8, 1960, Kennedy beats Nixon by 0.1 percent of the popular vote. "So the Kennedys started ruling and I started attacking them," is how Sahl will remember this moment. But word soon gets back that Camelot doesn't need a court jester. Sahl suddenly finds it hard to get gigs. The Crescendo's new owner tells him, "I've been told that the White House would be offended if I hired you and I'd be audited on my income tax. I heard that you offended the President."

**NOVEMBER
22
1963**

In Dallas' Dealey Plaza,

somebody really offends JFK by blowing out the back of his head as he travels in a motorcade with his young wife, Jackie. Then the only suspect,

Lee Harvey Oswald, is shot on live television. The Warren Commission is published in October 1964 and declares case closed: Oswald acted alone.

Unlike the majority of Americans, Sahl refuses to believe the Warren Commission. Unlike all other public figures, he does something about it. See, the new love of his life is China Lee. She is, as befitting Sahl's life of fame and firsts, *Playboy's* first-ever Asian centrefold. But that's by the by. More importantly, China is from New Orleans, Louisiana, and she knows the district attorney there, a man by the name of Jim Garrison, and he's on the trail of the assassins who killed Kennedy.

Sahl does more than champion Garrison from the stage or in his TV appearances. He joins him by moving to New Orleans and working for four years as an investigator in the DA's office. His comedy career disappears out from under him. The case becomes his obsession, just as it did for Garrison, who the world best knows in the guise of Kevin Costner in Oliver Stone's hyperkinetic 1991 conspiracy epic *JFK*.

During the investigation Sahl says he learned who orchestrated the plot to kill Kennedy. He also learns that while it was tough getting work



Sahl bucked comedic convention by ditching the tux and taking his material direct from the news headlines.

as a critic of Kennedy, it's almost impossible to get a gig when you're up on stage, reading mockingly from the Warren Commission report and claiming JFK was the victim of a CIA-orchestrated coup.

**FEBRUARY
16
2011**

Age has wearied Mort Sahl

but it hasn't mellowed him. He walks into The Depot, a café adjoining a bookstore in the centre of Mill Valley near San Francisco, with a slow but steady gait. He has a full head of pewter hair, a firm handshake and a ready smile. That voice – the one whose very tone seems to ask, "Are you kidding me?" – hasn't changed in six decades.

Sahl moved here last year and loves his new home. The San Francisco area made him, nearly 60 years ago, and has more recently been his saviour. Though he was born in Canada, Sahl grew up in Los Angeles in "a very dirt poor suburb called South Gate". He used to imitate radio announcers as a young child but was swept along in WWII fervour and tried to enlist for service at 16. When that failed he went to West Point but military service didn't stick. He ended up at USC and took a degree in urban planning but harboured dreams of becoming a performer. That fantasy only came true when he followed his girlfriend and future wife Sue Babior north to Berkeley. She encouraged him to

try out at the hungry i, reasoning, "If they don't understand you, they'll label it whimsy."

"I came up here and I had great luck with the audience," Sahl says of those days when he lived on a boat in Sausalito, just down the road from where we sit, and did three shows a night. "I stayed about 15 years." Then he moved to Beverly Hills, where he kept the same house for 43 years. "I had a series of calamities and something urged me to come back and I did," he says. "I'm glad I did."

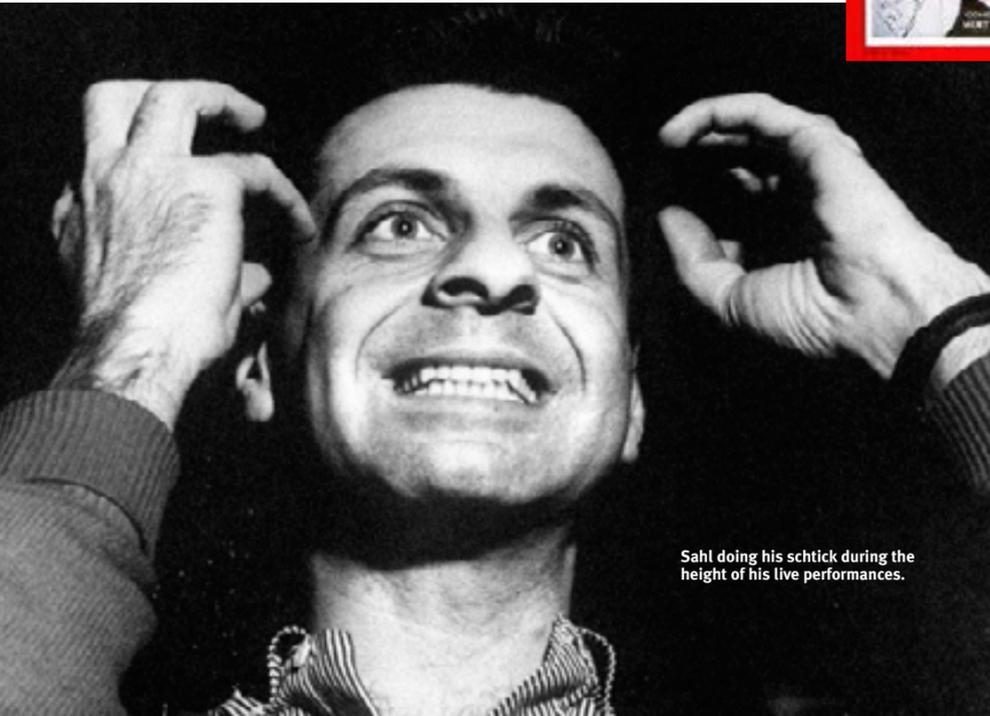
Those recent calamities are the breakdown of his third marriage, which ended in divorce last year, and a stroke that left him blind in one eye. But the shadow of older calamities looms, too – the career nosedive, the breakdown of his second marriage to China in 1991, and the death of their only son, Mort Jr, in 1996.

Anyway, onward. Sahl doesn't dwell on such things in conversation. He's glad for the friends he has in Mill Valley, including Robin Williams, with whom he hangs out a lot, and Lucy Mercer, the founder of the town's 142 Throckmorton Theatre, where Sahl performs occasionally. Old buddy Clint Eastwood lives nearby, too, and he talks to Woody Allen on the phone all the time and will see him next week in New York. They all love Sahl and it's easy to see why. He's a real-life Don Quixote.

Today Sahl's restless mind is amused that in the past few days Americans have thrilled both to the Grammy Awards and the ousting of Mubarak in Egypt. Not surprisingly, he has a volatile opinion on both.

"It's all grotesque now," he says of the Grammys. "It's highly sexualised and raucous. It doesn't have anything to do with the original intent." That's the sort of curmudgeonly comment you'd expect from any self-respecting Grampa Simpson wearing an onion on his belt. Except that, well, this old guy hosted the first Grammys and worked with genuine

'[Today's comedians] don't draw blood. They're soft because they live in an insular world... they look down on the group that doesn't agree with them.'



Sahl doing his schtick during the height of his live performances.

Getty Images



Sahl (second from left) hangs with Frank Sinatra, George Jessel and Dean Martin at a 1956 Friar's Club Testimonial for Martin. At home in 1982 with his wife China and (now deceased) son Mort Jr (below). With fellow comedians at the All-Star Comedy Salute to Mort Sahl held to mark his 80th birthday in 2007 (below, left). Mort at 80 (right).



been, he argues, since November 22, 1963. "I'll be very candid with you, I think he was executed in public to paralyse any successor," he says. "Jack was the last one who stood up to the CIA. He would've ended the Vietnamese war and they killed him for it. It's that simple. The wealthy people felt that he had come in under a certain label and an agreement was made to remove him."

Who, I ask, did he and Garrison conclude gave the order? "There is in Churchill's words, a 'high cabal' which expresses to each other an agreement of who has to go," Sahl begins. With a touch of weariness, he rattles off key points of circumstantial evidence, some of which still intrigue reasoned investigators, others that have long been discredited. If the "high cabal" claim brings to mind the words of Donald Sutherland's Mr X in Oliver Stone's *JFK*, it's no coincidence. While the film shows Garrison meeting him in Washington, DC, in reality it was Sahl who had the liaison with real-life intelligence whistleblower (and some would say, crank) Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty. True to form, that places Sahl at ground zero of the modern conspiracy theory.

When his stand-up career suffered, Sahl fell back on screenwriting, doing polishes on movies like *Tootsie* and *The Way We Were*. But his writing also remained in demand by politicians on both sides and he has met every president since Kennedy. I ask whether he pressed the JFK issue with them. He did – when he had the chance. "Carter promised me he'd reopen the assassination as soon as he was elected," he sighs. "I went to George McGovern, who ran against Nixon, and he had Jack's old office. I said, 'You gotta do something – we know who killed him!' He said, 'Well, you know, Mort, in your zeal, you've overlooked the fact that he wasn't that good a president.' I said, 'Is that punishable by death?'"

In Mort Sahl's America, politicians wear two stripes but are usually made of the same cloth. Same goes for the media. "I think that both parties are penetrated by the intelligence

agencies as a point of control," he says. "Hegel's idea was to control debate by owning both sides."

But while he's contemptuous of George W. Bush and stalwart warmongers Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, Sahl reserves a fondness for Ronald Reagan and his secretary of state, Alexander Haig, who was a longtime friend. That he occasionally wrote for these guys – and for first President Bush and Ross Perot – further alienated him from his liberal-minded fans. The feeling's mutual. Sahl felt the sting of liberal backlash long ago when most of his celebrity friends backed away from him over the stridency of his JFK claims. "The irony was they were selling him to me like they do Obama now. Until he fell. Then I, the critic, went over and said, 'Who killed him?' I never heard from one of them. I was treated with a good deal of brutality in Hollywood for even bringing it up."

Sahl has happily paid back the favour by unloading both barrels on liberals wherever he finds them – even the funny ones.

'Expose yourself to the truth and see that it isn't lethal. Cleanse yourself.'



"The comedians are remarkably disinterested," he says.

"Even Jon Stewart?" I ask, naming the person often cited as a Sahl successor.

"They don't draw blood," he responds. "They're soft because they live in an insular world in New York; they look down on the group that doesn't agree with them. It's all soft stuff. It's liberalism, it's not radicalism. When Stewart comes on and talks about Clinton reverently, nobody mentions that he took away the civil rights of every girl that sued him, that he didn't react to Rwanda..."

Sahl's also no fan of Obama, who he met at

a fundraiser at Barbra Streisand's place. "He's so concessionary – not matter what you ask him, he says it's on the way," he laughs. A few months ago, doing a show at the Throckmorton, Sahl was met with shocked silence when he mocked the President with the chanted counter-catchphrase, "No he can't!"

Today, he's unrepentant. "All the liberals were saying, 'It's time for a black man.' Not just any black man – somebody who will ennoble them," he observes at one point. "What it amounts to is spectacle rather than product," he says of Obama a while later. "He talks to 70,000 people at a time and it's spectacle. Then he says, 'We need a saviour!' And guess who it is? It's him. Except, it isn't... You may notice the Great Man hasn't closed Guantanamo, either."

It'd be a mistake to think of Sahl as a misanthrope. Rather, he's an idealist who can't stomach that his beloved nation falls so short of perfection, whether through maliciousness or misguided intentions. That attitude always came across in his records but on those, he resembles an incredibly hip if remote professor. In person, and thanks, I suspect, to the passage of years, he's a warmer figure, like the grandfather you'd visit every chance you had.

"The first thing you have to do is sanitise yourself," he says when I ask him whether there's hope for the world. "Expose yourself to the truth and see that it isn't lethal. Cleanse yourself. The other answer is very simple: it's love. I don't know if it's Christian love but the Christian part is forgiveness. It's a big word in America but I don't think many people practice it. Real forgiveness. If you can forgive people for being what they are and then if you can love somebody... you can get the girl." He laughs. "So it's really a movie. It's driving the bad guys out of town and getting the girl."

Sahl admits regrets. "Yes, of course, but I would make the same choices," he says. "But I miss a lot of things. I'm divorced now but I love my wife... and the wife before that. I made an awful lot of money but I still wasn't able to hang onto my home. I think that the truth is the truth and you're stuck with it, one way or the other."

He's still hurt at the backlash he suffered. "I thought it'd be like *Mr Smith Goes To Washington*, they'd hoist me on their shoulders." He laughs. "It didn't happen!"

I'm still down here with you folks."

Towards the end of our lunch, one of those folks – a middle-aged woman from Boston – interrupts to announce she's a fan. Sahl receives her graciously. Once she's made her exit from The Depot, he tells me why he still gets this sort of attention.

"They're loyal because, you see, I always told them the truth. I didn't tell them what was in fashion." He laughs – that trademark staccato bark that punctuated his act, a satirical comment in itself. "A lot of them hated me for it, but it's true."



Adams thanks Mort for paying for lunch... probably.

Mort Sahl takes to the stage in front of 250 or so fans at the Throckmorton Theatre. He wears the familiar sweater still but tonight, has abandoned the newspaper. Not that it matters

because over 90 minutes, he kills. He jokes about Obama meeting with Mark Zuckerberg, makes terrific sport of Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, charts the real wit of Alexander Haig and the humour vacuum that is Henry Kissinger. He announces that he's signed on for a new movie called *Max Rose* in which he'll play opposite Jerry Lewis – and then, like the scorpion on the frog, can't resist the stinger: "It's the first time I've laughed at Jerry Lewis, but there it is!"

There is a dodgy moment, about half-way through, when Sahl suddenly gets breathless, asks for a glass of water and a chair. He does the rest of the show sitting down but he doesn't falter again. No doubt one day he'll go anyway, onward into that good night – but there seems little chance Sahl will do so quietly. ♣



music legends who'll stand the test of time when Ke\$ha and Cee Lo Green are reduced to answers in trivia competitions.

Sahl's take on Egypt is more specific. "The American media's story is that this is a victory for us," he says, laughing exasperatedly. "Mubarak worked for us for 30 years! And when Obama wanted Mubarak to quit, he sent Frank Wisner." He registers, not unkindly, that I've drawn a blank on the name. "Wisner is Mubarak's lawyer and Wisner's father was the CIA agent who overthrew [former Iranian Prime Minister] Mosaddegh. Is it a case of, 'Only Mort knows that?' It's all on Wikipedia."

Later, doing my own research, I find that, yes, Wisner's father, Frank Snr, was not only a pivotal CIA figure in the 1953 overthrow of the Iranian government but he also oversaw Operation Mockingbird, in which the agency thoroughly penetrated the American media during the Cold War.

Our ignorance, Sahl believes, has much to do with the legacy of Wisner Snr.

True to his stage persona, Sahl digresses a



lot in conversation. But he's a long way from dotty – you just have to keep up with his verbal footnotes and annotations. He flits from the last true Americans he knew (JFK, Garrison, John Wayne, Steve McQueen) and recent movies he couldn't abide (*The Social Network* – "if that's the future it's terrifying"; *The King's Speech* – "constipated") to feminism ("Any woman who demands equality renounces her superiority," he's fond of saying, quoting George Bernard Shaw) and Julian Assange ("I think that was entrapment with the girls – he's talking about the world and they're talking about him personally, like they did with Garrison").

Though the topics and time frames are wide-ranging, what underpins much of what he says is the conviction that America is no longer a place of justice or romance or heroes. It hasn't

'[My fans] are loyal because, you see, I always told them the truth. I didn't tell them what was in fashion.'



John M.Heller/Getty Images (2); Austral; Corbis

