

## THE PROGRESSIVE INTERVIEW

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*by Marc Cooper*

# George Carlin

George Carlin as political and social philosopher? Why not? One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who so consistently, for more than three decades now, has stood before the public, in venues both small and global, to tell so many dirty and ugly and hilarious truths about the way we Americans live. Or pretend to live.

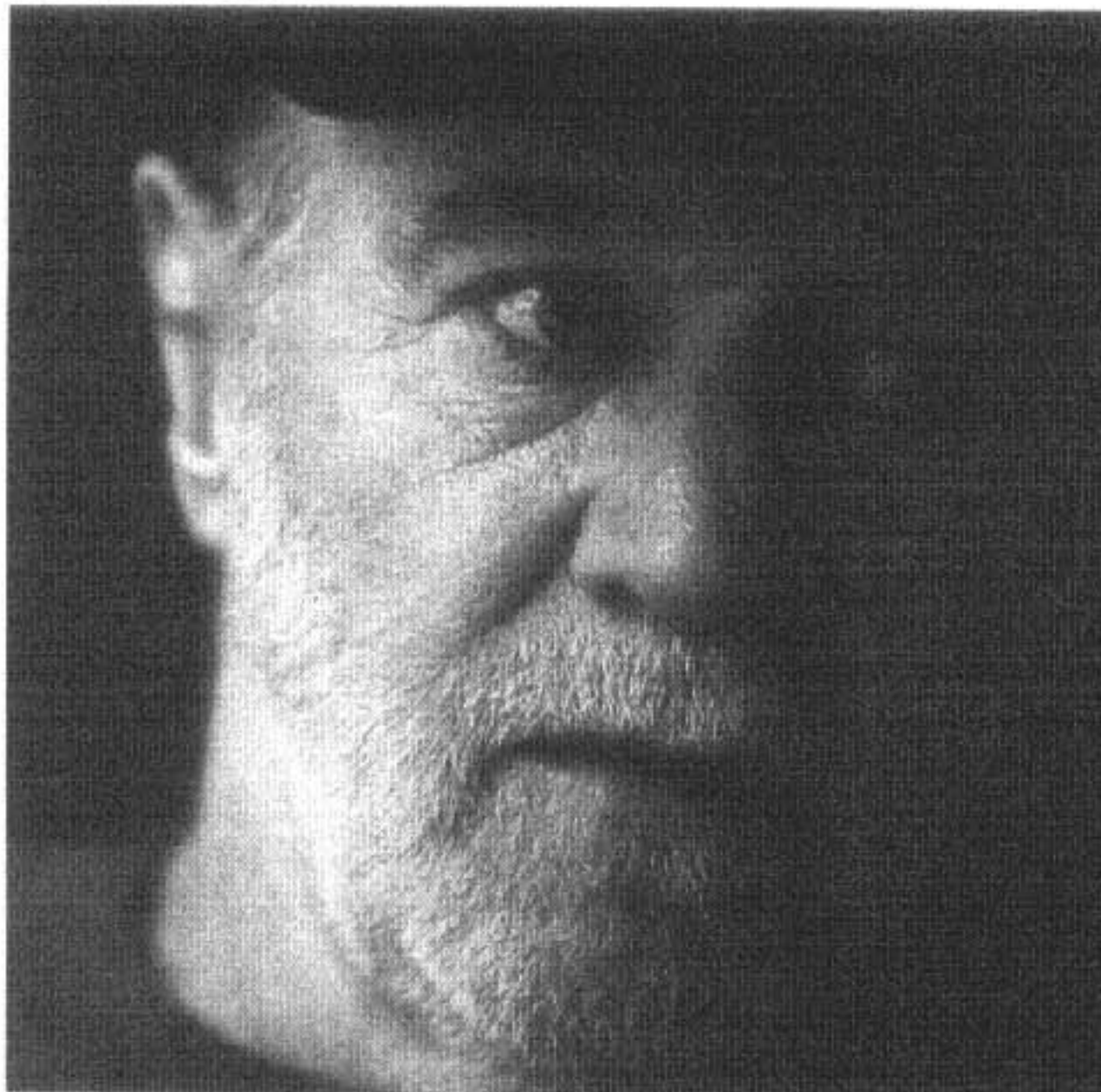
Carlin's arc has been impressive. From frat-boy radio shtick in the early '60s, to a clean-cut stand-up comic, to a dooper-friendly hippie in the '70s, Carlin's persona has morphed again today into a curmudgeonly bad conscience for a society that he sees as ill with consumerism and self-satisfaction.

Most famous for his routine "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," Carlin has eighteen comedy albums to his name, four of them gold. He has performed eleven solo HBO comedy specials. His 1997 book, *Brain Droppings* (Hyperion), spent forty weeks on *The New York Times* bestsellers' list, and his new book, *Napalm & Silly Putty* (Hyperion), is number one on that list today.

Now at age sixty-four, Carlin is not so much a comedian as a performance

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artist who toils endlessly at his task. Performing several nights a week on the road, he spends months at a time carefully honing his new material that he will eventually use on HBO.

I caught up with Carlin a couple of times over the last several months, and here are some excerpts.

**Q** • What is the relationship between napalm and Silly Putty?

**George Carlin:** Well, there are two reasons it’s the title of the book. One, it’s always sort of amused me that mankind has been able to come up with a lot of things, two of them being napalm—which is a jellied substance that burns the skin and kills—and Silly Putty, which is something that you can press onto a comic and see a backwards picture of Popeye. And somewhere between these two extremes lies our truth. And I don’t know how good we are at pursuing it. That’s just sort of an oddball title, but it also describes kind of the two extremes of my own performing and writing personality. I have things that are strident and confrontational, and I have a lot of things that are childlike and innocent and sort of sweet. So, somewhere in between lies the middle of me.

**Q:** What can you do in a book that you can’t do on stage?

**Carlin:** Things occur to me that are not all useful for stand-up, just nice observations that by themselves would have no place in the stand-up show. And there are some things in the book that are altered somewhat for the page—the ear and the eye kind of enjoy things differently. It’s just a matter of my finding out in the

last ten years that I actually was a writer who had the ability to perform his own work as opposed to a comedian who wrote his own material. So that really made me happy and changed my whole perspective.

**Q:** One of the fascinations that you have, whether it’s on the page or on the stage, is with the English language, its use, perversion. This must be a very rich time when you’ve got a President who so mangles the English language.

**Carlin:** I think he’s an imbecile, and it’s just wonderful because the American public kind of gets what it deserves, and I think they deserve this one.

**Q:** You argue in your new book that language is more often than not a tool for keeping knowledge from people.

**Carlin:** By and large, language is a tool for concealing the truth. If we could read each other’s minds, this would be a horror show. This stuff we call society would really be interesting. So we kind of shape our truths as we speak them. We fashion things to suit the occasion or the person or our own needs in the moment.

**Q:** How cynical or pessimistic are you about politics in general?

**Carlin:** I’m certainly a skeptic. I always quibble with people. I like to split hairs. And I quibble with people who say, “Well, you’re cynical.” And I know there’s a second and third definition of cynical where my stuff fits. But to me the cynics are the ones in the boardrooms with the reports from the focus groups. And the belief that there’s a man in the sky watching

us, watching everything we do, is so ingrained: First thing they do is tell you there's an invisible man in the sky who's going to march you down to a burning place if he doesn't like you. If they can get you to believe that, it's all over. Before you're six years old, they've got you thinking that, they've got you forever on anything else they want. There's no real education. It's an indoctrination training little producers of goods who will also be consumers of goods. Some will be on the producer side, and more will be on the consumer side. But you're all being trained to be a part of this big circle of goods being pumped out and everyone buying them and everyone going to work to help make more of them for other people to buy.

I've given up on the whole human species. I think a big, good-sized comet is exactly what this species needs. You know, the poor dinosaurs were walking around eating leaves, and they were completely wiped out. Let the insects have a go. You know, I don't think they'll come up with sneakers with lights in them, or Dust Busters, or Salad Shooters, or snot candy.

**Q: But a comet, say a big Arizona-sized comet smashing somewhere into the Pacific Ocean, would be pretty bad for business, wouldn't it?**

**Carlin:** It would be terrible, and it would be wonderful. Just to see it all, you know. I only wish there were some way I could live out on the moon and watch it all on CNN. And just see the whole thing happen, see the big splash. Or have it hit land and this big cloud erupt. That would be fun to see. I'm just a fan of big disasters. And that is as big as they get. Let 'em go. I just want to describe the mess.

But, you know, life is dual. If you'll scratch a cynic, you'll find a disappointed idealist. And the fire never goes out completely. And that part of me that made my mother say, "You have a lovely nature," is very true.

**Q: Is there anything out there happening that would check your despair with the human species? Or are we on the big slide down, here?**

**Carlin:** It's called CTD—Circling The Drain. I didn't need to see it used recently in *The New York Times* to know that it's medical terminology. But the thing I must point out is that my despair is of the group itself, the group as it's assembled. And I've never identified with the "local group," no matter what it identifies itself as. But I do cherish, and love, and am thrilled by individuals. People, one by one as I meet them, I find are wondrous. When you have time to listen and watch them, when you look in the eyes, you see all the potential of the whole thing, this whole species that

had such a wonderful gift that was given by nature. The mind, the ability to objectify and to think abstractly. And we've wasted it by everyone wanting a fanny pack and to go to the mall and to be paying 18 percent interest on things that we don't need, don't want, don't work, and can't give back.

**Q: It was back in October, I believe, 1973, and WBAI, a Pacifica station in New York, played one of your routines, the "Seven Dirty Words," and it resulted in an FCC complaint. What inspired that routine? You knew that routine wasn't going to get any airplay, right?**

**Carlin:** The original routine was called "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." I did a sequel to it on the third album called "Filthy Words." That's the one BAI played. Of course, it included all the words. It's just that it took things a little further. That's just my anal side, trying to get the terminology correct. And I apologize for that. "Seven Dirty Words"—which is what *The Los Angeles Times* called it (I had never used that term, and that became the term it was known by)—was part of the second album, *Class Clown*. And it, too, was part of a follow-up to something called "Shoot" that was on the first album. "Shoot," I said, was shit with two Os. When people say, "Oh, shoot," they're really saying, "Oh, shit." And I was surprised that I got fired in Las Vegas for saying "shit" in a town where the official game is craps.

Language is one of my loves, and I love bothering people when I am able to, and I wanted to investigate these words and try to lay them out in a logical way: why these seven qualified as ones you could never say, whereas some of them were dirty only part of the time.

**Q: Now these were . . .**

**Carlin:** "Shit," "fuck," "cunt," "motherfucker," "cocksucker," "tits," "piss."

**Q: That has apparently changed some in the last twenty-seven years.**

**Carlin:** Only a little bit, though. As far as I know, the word "piss" is the only one you'll hear on commercial television with any regularity, and only when it's used as "pissed off." See, we don't mind anger in this country. "Pissed off" is fine.

**Q: It's the body function that's irritating.**

**Carlin:** It's all right for one guy to say, "Why are you pissed off at me?" But the other guy cannot say, "Well, because you pissed on me." That's not allowed.

**Q:** Your lawsuit lingered for most of the decade of the seventies and wound up being adjudicated unfortunately by the Supreme Court, if I remember.

**Carlin:** That's right, and it was a 5-to-4 decision in 1978, five years after the fact. The decision said that the FCC did have the right to regulate what the Court called "indecent language." It didn't meet the test for obscenity, but the decision was that because these are the "public airwaves" that come into the home unbidden and by surprise, someone might hear them and be offended, so they had some right to regulate. And that, of course, leaves out the fact that there are two knobs on the radio and television: One turns it off, the other changes the station.

**Q:** Your onstage persona has gone through several changes. I've seen a lot of the stuff from probably the second phase, the hippie phase. But before that, you were kind of a David Letterman.

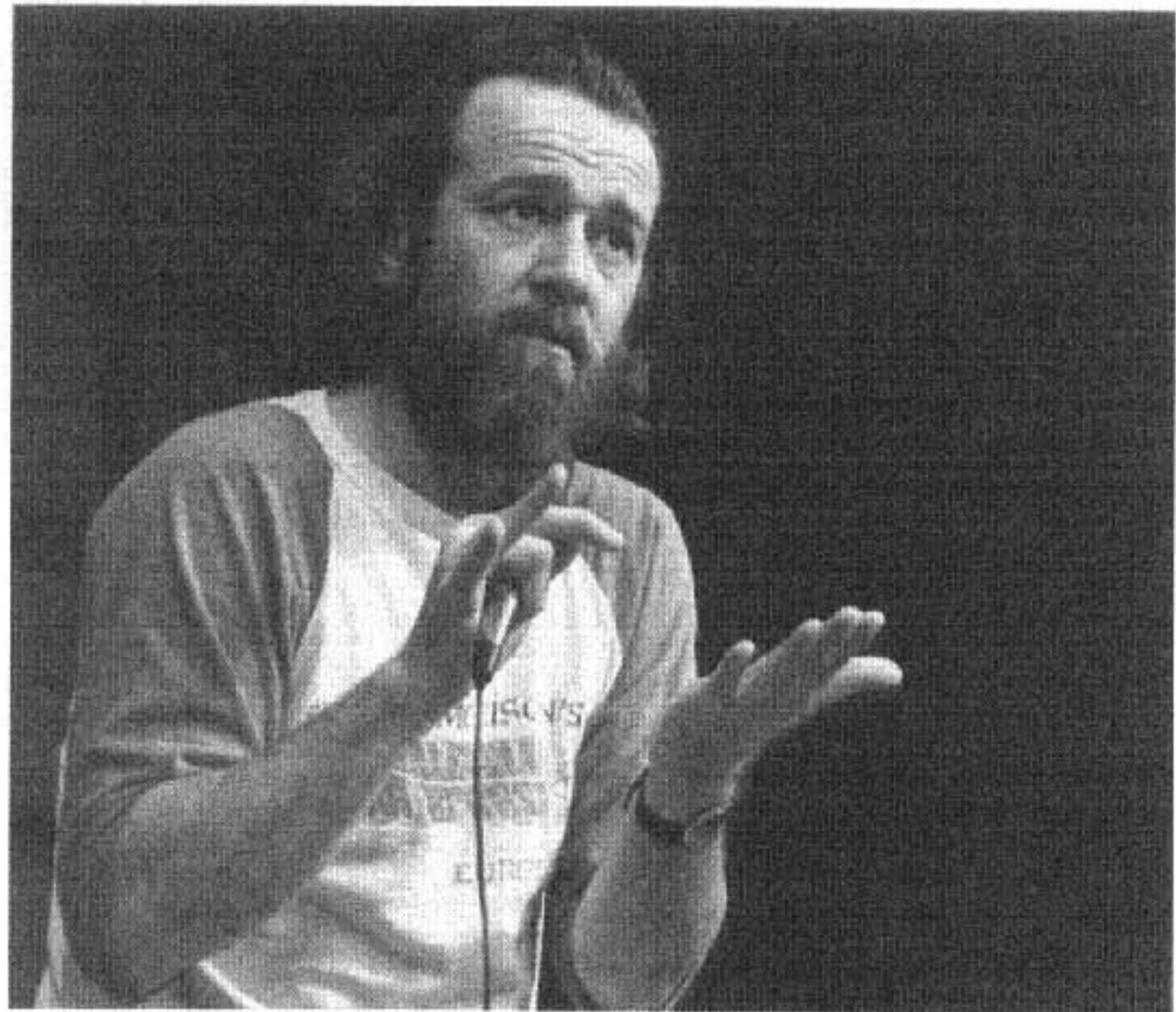
**Carlin:** Suit and tie, short hair, no beard.

**Q:** That was pretty funny.

**Carlin:** In retrospect, I know it. I can tell you how that came about. It takes a little describing. When I was a little boy, I was funny, and I wanted to be a comedian or something like that. Comedy, I figured, was the thing that came to me the most easily. Playing the trumpet and piano took practice. I thought that was a waste of time. I'd go out on the street corner and be funny. In a minute. So I set out to become a comedian, and I said in order to do that the first thing I'll do is become a disc jockey and know my pop music. I like it, my voice is good, and I can start out getting confidence without an audience in front of me. If that goes well, I'll become a stand-up comic, and if that goes well, I'll be like Danny Kaye. That was my ultimate ambition, to be a movie guy like Danny Kaye or Bob Hope or Red Skelton. A funny actor. So I was a little boy, nine, ten years old, and that's my dream. Now I was out of step with authority all my life—never really sat well with me, being told what to do. Quit my religion in grade school, got kicked out of four different schools, got kicked out of the Air Force, the choir, the Boy Scouts, summer camp, and the altar boys.

**Q:** The clean sweep.

**Carlin:** Yes, I had this other B-side to me. One side wants to be like Danny Kaye, and the other doesn't get along with any of the rules. So I found myself following the Danny Kaye thing, because that's what



**Carlin in his hippie phase:** "There was now a built-in audience for the rebel in me that had been all along not expressing himself."

show business was, that's what success was: pleasing other people. And I was a child of the 1950s, so to speak. So I came out of the suit-and-tie, three-button-suit period, a clean look, and I managed to attract some attention during that decade of 1960-1965, '66, '67. And what I found was, I was completely out of place entertaining people I really didn't like or agree with socially, culturally. Suddenly, I was thirty, very unhappy entertaining people in their forties, and here came a group of people in their teens and twenties who had similar anti-authority problems and similar dreams and wishes, hopes for mankind. So I gravitated toward them. There was now a built-in audience for the rebel in me that had been all along not expressing himself.

**Q:** Who influenced you as a comedian?

**Carlin:** When you start in the childhood period, when you begin to form a comic sense, it was the radio comedians—from the last days of radio and the first days of television. And Spike Jones. And the Marx Brothers. They represented anarchy. They took things that were nice and decent and proper, and they tore them to shreds. That attracted me. Then Martin and Lewis came along, and Jerry Lewis became important for me to emulate. I had a silly side, too. Then as I'm getting a little older in the teen years you had Ernie Kovacs, Bob and Ray, and the early Steve Allen on the old *Tonight Show*. And then comedy

really pivoted and changed completely: Mort Saul, Lenny Bruce, Shelley Berman, Nichols and May, Dick Gregory, Bob Newhart. All were influences, but the most telling ones were from that period where comedy went from a safe thing that described everything outside of a person to where comics started talking about their feelings, about how rigid the society was, the whole rebellion against the fifties mindset. That was what had the biggest influence. And Lenny led the way.

**Q: What about family influences?**

**Carlin:** Whatever genetic skills in language I had came through my family: verbal ability, being able to entertain, I think New York helped play a big part in that. And the fact that I spent a lot of time alone. My father was not present in the family. He was asked to leave at an early period when it was discovered that he could not successfully metabolize ethanol, and so he was given his hat. And my mother worked in a rather responsible job in advertising and came home around seven o'clock, so I had a lot of time on my own for the radio, for hanging out, for thinking, and I invented a kind of autonomous world that made me very happy. I had only one parent, no grandparents, only one sibling, and that was just paradise for me. So that circumstance contributed to my ability to create a world of interest to me. And even though I went to a Catholic school, it was a very permissive setting. There was no corporal punishment. This was an experimental school across from Columbia University in the 1940s that had no report cards, no grades of any kind, and no uniforms, and the sexes were not segregated, and the desks were all movable. You changed groupings every month. It was a complete experimental school, and I had eight years of that. In spite of the overlay of the religion, it was not the kind of thing we think of when we think of Catholic schools. So that contributed to my trust in my own worth and thought.

**Q: So you owe your rebellious streak to a bunch of nuns in a Catholic school?**

**Carlin:** They sure gave me the tools to reject the very religion they wanted me to have. They taught me how to think for myself and to be independent.

**Q: There are very few places, even in the comic world, where people are so openly blasphemous as you are. And I love every second of it. Why the absolute, unremitting scorn for religion?**

**Carlin:** I take pride in it. Sometimes people will say,

"That's bigotry, can't you see? You wouldn't attack blacks, you wouldn't attack Jews." I say, "Wait a minute, religion is a self-conferred intellectual decision; it's not something you get at birth and is unchangeable. You're collusive with the religion when you accept it; you have a choice." So I think intellectually if you accept it, intellectually I have every right to question that choice you made. Whereas your blackness, ethnicity, homosexuality is something that might be genetic, I can't touch that, and I have no right.

Everything that you know about yourself comes from thinking back, and I think I saw religion as the first big betrayal of me. You know, they promised everything. I remember at first communion I was seven years old, and they said, "You're going to feel different, you're going to get the blessed sacrament in your mouth, and you will be in a state of grace, you will feel God's presence." I thought, "None of that happened." And I can remember noticing that. I probably, at some level, decided to listen a little more carefully to what they were saying in the future and maybe not just buy it all. But I was openly disdainful of what they were teaching before I reached eighth grade. And I felt that they attempted to lead me astray; they attempted to promise me things that weren't attainable through their narrow method.

I think religion is very anti-man. I think it's a terrible distortion and exploitation of a very natural urge every human has—to be rejoined with the one somehow, to become a part of the universe. Once the high priests and the traders took over, we were lost as a species.

**Q: You talk about businessmen with such scorn. That's the lifeblood of America, isn't it?**

**Carlin:** It absolutely is, and that's probably why there is so much scorn. Everybody in America is a part of this big herd of cattle being led to the marketplace, not to be sold, which is usual with cattle, but to do the buying. And everyone is branded. You see the brands—Nike, Puma, Coke—all over their bodies. Pretty soon you'll go to a family and say, "\$100,000 if we can tattoo Pepsi on your child's forehead, and we'll have it removed when he's twenty-one. A hundred grand." I'm sure the George Washington Bridge will someday be the Ford Motor Company George Washington Bridge. It's gone beyond what you can merely mock, so it has to be a frontal attack. Folks, this is bullshit. This is jerk-off time. Don't you see what's happening? What you're doing? What you're participating in? You know, that justice is blind, everyone's equal, the press is fair and impartial. It's what I call the "American Okey-Dokey." It's the official bullshit story.

And Americans have, for long enough now, been exposed to the exaggerated reality of the experiment here that they accept it. And the prosperity makes it easy enough for them not to go ahead and question things. You get a good five-, six-year depression in this country, and you'll see some folks out with torches and shit. I mean, that's what I would love to see. But who's going to do that when you're comfy?

**Q: What was it like when you moved into the counterculture and talked a lot about drugs and rified against religion. How hard was it to get on television and get mass media exposure when you were dealing with those kinds of subjects?**

**Carlin:** I was trying to get out of the night clubs and was thinking maybe I'll go to the colleges now; that's where you can speak your mind. I was fully committed to the new identity, and the new format got largely autobiographical, by the way. Besides the drugs and counterculture, I started talking about myself, which is the first thing you do when you are a writer. I did the *Class Clown* album, the *Occupational Fool* album, all about my background. Once I hit that period in '72 and began to have albums, that became my way of reaching a mass audience. Taking my concerts, putting them on audio, and sending the disks out to record stores. Television became less important, but there were still plenty of opportunities. There was *Midnight Special*, which was all about musicians and rebellion and longhairs. And there was *The Flip Wilson Show*. But the *Carson* show pulled back and was very leery at first. The talk was something like, "He's flipped out! The guy was making twelve five a week in Vegas. And he starts cursing, and he grows his hair! He's flipping out! The guy must be on that acid."

**Q: Part of that was true.**

**Carlin:** Yeah, the acid was a catalyst. Certainly, the acid and mescaline in the late sixties helped to catalyze these urges that I had to be more myself and to criticize what I felt around me. But by that time, the career was getting solid, and yet there was still this sort of fear. For the *Carson* show it took a while, then they heard from other people, "He's showing up on time, he's actually showing up on time!"

**Q: Let's talk about your current persona. I have the impression it is probably the most authentic.**

**Carlin:** My answer is, this is the most authentic because this is how old I am now. I felt very authentic in the early seventies finally breaking out of the suit, finally breaking out of the structures of that fifties

mentality. That's who I was then, and I've always tried to find in me what's next and who I'm becoming.

For a long time, I've distinguished between entertainer and performer and entertainer and artist. To me, an entertainer is someone who pleases others, and an artist tries to please himself. An artist is on a journey: They don't know where they're going, what is going to happen, but they know they are not there yet, and there is some continuity and growth. I think of myself as an entertainer: I'm a performing entertainer, I'm a stand-up comic. But there's an artist at work here, too. One who interprets his world through his own filter.

**Q: I've often wondered, and I wonder if you wonder, what must be the reaction of some Shriner who walks into Bally's hotel in Las Vegas and he just put aside that cottage cheese carton full of quarters. He sits down because his wife tells him there's this great comedian here, and you're up there talking about the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and saying, "Let's chop up the golf courses."**

**Carlin:** I do wonder. And it makes me glow all over. I just love it when I hear a little commotion, someone leaving. When I see those doors in the back . . .

**Q: Swing open!**

**Carlin:** Yeah. And when I get to that God thing, night after night, they would just open a little more frequently than they had twenty minutes earlier. And I take pride in that. Let's separate these folks immediately. People who thought they liked me, people who thought, "Well, he's a little controversial, sometimes he'll say the country's on a bad course, but, you know, he's pretty funny."

**Q: On your HBO specials, at the beginning of your routine, you've put in some really tough, really controversial political material. Is that a calculated strategy?**

**Carlin:** Well, it's not articulated to myself in any terms like that. It's a showman's sense of what dynamics are necessary. I want everyone who tunes in at the top of the HBO hour—people who are longtime fans, people who can't wait to see the show, those who are part time, casual fans—to know the game is still the same: We're talking about how fucked up you are. Then, after that, I'll show you how cute I am. I'll show you that I can dance around a little, too. You know, got to get out with energy, and show that there's no line that I'll be observing here tonight. ♦