

HAIL CAESARS!

TV

BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER

GREAT CAESARS WHO DIDN'T NEED A THRONE

REAL CAESARS LIVED IN ROME, RULED THROGS OF SUBJECTS,
LED POWERFUL ARMIES, WORE TOGAS, ETC., ETC.

NOT THESE GUYS. THE FOLLOWING FOUR CAESARS
EARNED THEIR PLACES IN HISTORY, WHILE GIVING NEW
MEANING TO MAKING A NAME FOR YOURSELF.



SID CAESAR

(BORN 1922)

SOMETIMES, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In Sid Caesar's case, it was the beginning of a brilliant career.

Growing up in Yonkers, N.Y., young Sid had plenty to mimic. His father owned a local restaurant that catered to all kinds of people. It was Sid's home away from home, filled with countless dialects just waiting to be imitated. And while he quickly honed his impressions to the point of hilarity, Caesar's official break into showbiz was in music, toting around a saxophone (he studied the instrument at Julliard) and performing for soldiers during WWII. However, his backstage shows—entertaining friends with his brilliant crack-ups, crazy voices, and wild pantomimes—soon overshadowed his musical performances. Caesar's antics eventually landed him a role in the Coast Guard revue “Tars and Spars,” which toured the country in the mid-1940s to great success and landed on film in 1946. Next came his first TV gig on a show called “Admiral Broadway Revue” (lot of revues in those days, and lots of sponsors). Not long after, NBC exec Pat Weaver caught the budding comedian's act. Weaver was so impressed that he offered Caesar a prime spot on his brainchild, 1950's “Your Show of Shows.”

The program ran for four seasons and made Caesar America's favorite funnyman. Basically a borscht-belt, vaudeville-style variety act, the show featured Caesar and his multi-talented co-star, Imogene Coca, spoofing, hamming, and clowning for the nation. With help from his writing staff (which included Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and Woody Allen), he developed classic skits that comedy troupes have copied ever since. Put simply, Caesar was like Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, and W.C. Fields all rolled into one.

He wasn't laughing on the inside, though. The pressures of performing a live show each week led to an addiction to golf ball-size tranquilizers and tumblers of Scotch on the rocks (a



scary habit for a guy who stood 6'2”, weighed 240 pounds, and had hands like a lumberjack). Caesar's fondness for drugs led to his unpleasant tendency to rant at writers' meetings. He once even threatened to throw poor Mel Brooks out of an 18th-story window. Luckily, Caesar took most of his anger and depression out on invisible demons, slaying them with brilliant physical comedy. He also had a good shrink. In fact, he was one of the first performers to talk openly about being in therapy. With psychoanalysis being all the rage in New York at the time (still is, of course), Caesar and his gaggle of comedians took full advantage by writing about it (and their overbearing mothers, oy!).

Eventually, the pills and booze caught up with Caesar. He found little work after the cancellation of his 1958 show, “Sid Caesar Invites You,” and a downward spiral of drugs, nightmares, and tranquilizers kept him out of the Hollywood mainstream. Caesar performed in a few subsequent TV guest spots, but was mainly relegated to cameo parts during the 1960s and 1970s (a.k.a., “celebrity walk-ons” and the Roast Circuit). He had better luck with movie appearances in “History of the World, Part 1,” “It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World,” and “Grease.” Sid's fascinating 1982 autobiography, *Where Have I Been?*, details his struggles with drugs and alcohol, and reveals a surprising fear that his talents would one day disappear. They never did. Caesar was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 1987.



CÉSAR BALDACCINI (1921–1998)

CÉSAR BALDACCINI LIKED TO SMOOSH THINGS. Cars. Giant piles of trash. Huge sheets of metal. You name it; Baldaccini crushed it. But he didn't do it because he was mad (though he might have been). He did it for his art, man.

Baldaccini was a sculptor—a French artist of the New Realism movement, which took its inspiration from everyday realities. Instead of posing Mona Lisas or sketching lilies on a pond, New Realists did things such as taking old phone books out of dumpsters and slapping the pages onto canvasses. In Baldaccini's case, he grabbed rubbish including discarded metal, leather, and foam, and turned it into sculptural forms while simultaneously turning himself into an artistic superstar.

It's no surprise that Baldaccini's vision came from growing up poor in France. He quit school at age 12 to earn money for his family, but studied at a local Marseille art academy before winning a scholarship to the *École des Beaux-Arts* in



Paris in 1943. With poverty as a backdrop, Baldaccini used the least expensive materials for his sculptures. Sometimes it was an abandoned car. Other times, it was a pair of blue jeans, a dead fish, or vegetable crates. One piece even featured thousands of smashed Cartier watches—fakes Baldaccini got from French officials who'd seized them in a customs raid.

And forget hiring expensive models to sit for portraits. Baldaccini's most famous works? Sculptural representations of his own thumb. Using a pile of pink plastic resin and a blowtorch, he created thumb sculptures in all sizes, including "Le Pouce," a 40-foot thumb constructed for a Parisian industrial park.

Baldaccini's art may have been made of junk, but most art critics and VIPs think his work is anything but garbage. He's often compared to Warhol, due to his pop-art sensibilities and anti-consumerism subject matter, and to Jackson Pollock, for his sometimes "accidental results" (such as when he boiled plastic and metal to create unexpected forms with brilliant color). Yet, Baldaccini refused to be lumped into one school of thought, preferring to remain as abstract as his work. To the point, he stepped outside his box in 1975 when he agreed to design the annual award statue for the French film industry (its version of the Oscar). The statuette was made of—what else?—crushed gold.



CESAR CHAVEZ (1927–1993)

THIS GUY DEFINITELY GETS THE AWARD for being the most selfless Cesar. Come to think of it, nix that. He gets the award for being the most selfless among any Bobby, Freddy, Joey, Billy, or Sammy list out there, too.

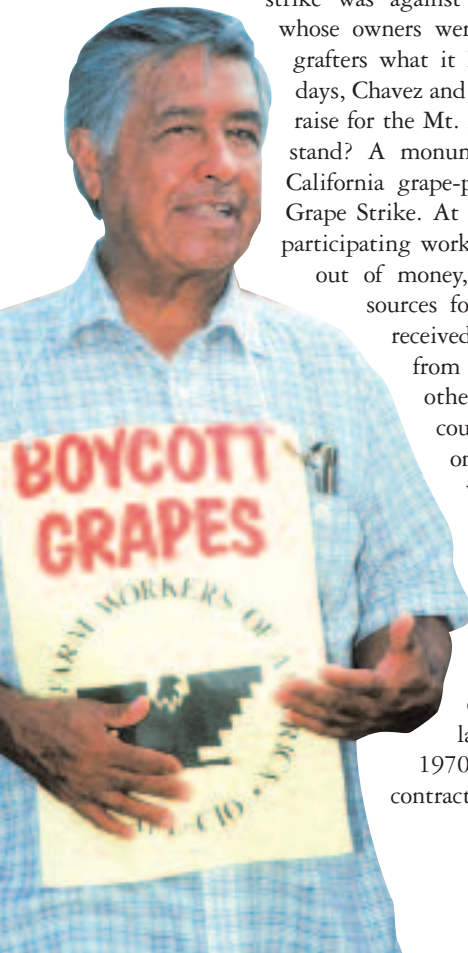
Chavez is the patron saint of migrant labor rights—a cause inspired by his firsthand experiences as the child of a migrant farming family from Mexico. Chavez spent his boyhood moving from farm to farm in California during a time when "whites only" sections were ubiquitous in restaurants and movie theaters around the state. And the older Chavez got, the more discrimination he experienced. Working in the fields hand-picking produce, he endured brutal conditions, ridiculous hours, and criminally low wages. In 1946, he joined the Navy and served in the Pacific for two years, but returned to California to toil in the fields. This time,

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though, he moonlighted as a labor-rights activist. For Chavez, 1948 was a big year. He married Helen Fabela, a like-minded advocate for social equality, and he participated in his first strike. It was a losing battle over low wages and lousy working conditions, but it taught Chavez a valuable lesson in organizing and strategy. Four years after his first defeat, Chavez joined forces with Saul Alinsky's Community Service Organization (CSO), registering Mexican-Americans to vote and traveling all over California empowering workers to take part in the democratic process. He eventually lost his job in the fields (it's hard to pick apricots when you're on the road), but replaced the gig by becoming the general director of the CSO in 1958. As such, he urged members to form a union, lest they be perceived as nothing more than whiners with a cause. But to no avail. In 1962, he left the CSO to form his own union for migrant farm workers, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

The NFWA came out of the gate swinging. Its first strike was against the Mt. Arbor Company, whose owners were refusing to pay its rose-grafters what it had promised. In only four days, Chavez and his new union had secured a raise for the Mt. Arbor employees. Its second stand? A monumental five-year protest for California grape-picker rights known as the Grape Strike. At first, the NFWA supported participating workers, but the union soon ran out of money, so Chavez went to other sources for help. To his surprise, he received money, food, and support from churches, universities, and other organizations across the country, which added pressure on the growers to agree to fair wages. Going a step further, the union began asking Americans to stop buying California table grapes to show their support for the cause. A few dozen marches, hunger strikes, and various non-violent protests later, it worked. On July 29, 1970, the growers signed new contracts with the union (by then



CAESAR CARDINI: THE MAN, THE MYTH, THE SALAD

CAESAR CARDINI (1896–1956) has gone down in history as the creator of the beloved Caesar salad.

Unfortunately, like all great tales of invention, the details can get fuzzy at times, and there are more than enough legacy-craving chefs out there who'll be happy to tell you the whole thing is a bunch of hokey. Still, as far as popular legends go, this one's a shoo-in for prom queen.

One thing is certain about Caesar Cardini: The man knew how to handle leftovers. Cardini was born in Italy near Lake Maggiore in 1896 and immigrated to America just after World War I. Once here, he and his little brother, Alex (an ace pilot in the Italian Air Force), decided to open a restaurant. In order to avoid draconian prohibition laws, the duo hopped the border to Tijuana and set up shop there. Not a bad idea. Southern Californians looking for a stiff drink to wash down their meals crossed down to Mexico quite often. Naturally, that included plenty of Hollywood types, including Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. On one particular July 4th weekend in 1924, a crew of actors were partying Tara Reed-style in Tijuana when their return trip was delayed due to heavy rain. Hungry and hungover, they stumbled into the restaurant, and Cardini scrambled to put together a meal for his guests. Thus, what was to become the world's most famous salad grew out of what he had left over in his refrigerator: romaine lettuce, coddled eggs, garlic, Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice, a spot of olive oil, some parmesan cheese, croutons, and salt and pepper. (The brilliant idea to add anchovies came later.) He whipped it all together at the table to ensure a grand spectacle, and—just like that—the famous Caesar salad was invented, ingested, and carried back to Tinseltown.



And just think: If Cardini had found liver, mayonnaise, and parsley in his pantry that night, the whole story would be moot.

Today, plenty of folks claim to have invented the Caesar salad. In 1935, a year after America regained its senses and repealed prohibition, Cardini sold his restaurant and hightailed it back to Los Angeles to make more salad. But, because "Caesar salad" was public domain, everyone and their brother were able to sell the dressing under the same title (hence the conflicting stories of origin). Not to worry, though. You can still buy the real thing. Just look for "Cardini's Original" Caesar dressing from Cardini Foods in Culver City, Calif. Accept no substitutions. The International Society of Epicures in Paris voted Cardini's salad "the greatest recipe to originate from the Americas in 50 years."

Caesar Sidenote: Caesar salads were nearly made illegal in California restaurants in 1998 due to stringent health laws that banned the preparation of any food containing raw eggs. Officials were concerned that the coddled eggs in a Caesar put eaters at the (slight) risk of salmonella poisoning. Public opinion ran about 99 percent against the idea, and the law was revised later that year.



CAESAR RODNEY (1730–1783)

LOOK UP CAESAR RODNEY in the encyclopedia, and you'll find a picture of ... well, you won't find an accurate picture of Caesar Rodney. Not because he wasn't one of America's most important patriots, but because he had a nasty cancer that disfigured his face, and so he never sat for a portrait (though portraits exist). What you might find, though, is ol' Caesar's autograph. He was, after

all, one of the key signers of the Declaration of Independence—a gig he landed while serving as the head of the Delaware militia during the American Revolution. Rodney, it turns out, was one of the strongest advocates for breaking with the Brits.

Born and raised in Dover, Del., Rodney was a bit of a civil servant savant. He was appointed sheriff at the age of 28, then justice of the peace. Soon thereafter, in 1765, he became a member of the Delaware Assembly. Three years later, he was elected Speaker of the Assembly. How's that for a resume?

Rodney almost missed his chance to cast Delaware's vote for independence, though. It required a midnight ride of his own to make it to Independence Hall in time. Turns out, on that fateful day of July 1, 1776, Rodney was busy quelling a Loyalist uprising back in his home state. The motion for Independence would have passed without him—and he knew that—but he wanted to be there simply to show Delaware's unflinching support for the cause. (If only they made politicians like him these days.) Riding through a nasty storm for more than 80 miles, he arrived in Philly on July 2, just in time to cast his ballot, the one that gave Delaware a 2-1 “yea” vote. “Let [Virginia] be of good cheer,” he proclaimed. “She has a friend in need; Delaware will take her under its protection and ensure her safety.” (They talked like that back then. It sounds better while wearing boots and wigs.)

After signing the Declaration of Independence, Rodney went on to become the “president” of Delaware from 1777 to 1781. And though he was elected to Congress in 1782, his health prevented him from taking the job. The cancer in his face had spread, and he wore a green silk screen to mask his appearance for the rest of his life, which ended only a year later. Today, Rodney lives on ... on a quarter. His famous horseback ride was depicted (facial features approximated, we imagine) on the very first coin issued in the Fifty State Quarter series, minted in 1999. 🍀

known as the United Farm Workers Association).

Today, Chavez's legacies can be counted by the bushel. Aside from his work as an advocate of unionizing, he resurrected the art of the non-violent protest. Like Gandhi before him, Chavez used fasts and marches to bring attention to social injustice. When strikers grew weary during the Grape Strike in 1968, he fasted purely to remind them to remain non-violent. He used the same tactic in 1972 and again in 1988, once losing 35 pounds in 25 days.

Chavez was also at the forefront of the environmental movement. He was one of the first to promote awareness about the effects of toxic pesticides not only to pickers, but to consumers. A firm believer in your mother's “you are what you eat” aphorism, he taught fruit and vegetable buyers to question the practices of their suppliers.

Chavez's life work of non-violent protest and self-sacrifice was recognized both in Mexico and the United States. He earned the Aguila Azteca (the Aztec Eagle), Mexico's highest honor, in 1991. And in 1994, he was posthumously awarded America's top civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And remember: the fruit never falls far from the tree. Chavez's children—Paul, Ana, Anthony, Fernando, Eloise, Sylvia, and Linda—all work with organizations that negotiate migrant rights.

