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December 28, 2007 -- Updated 1423 GMT (2223 HKT)

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Long line of Jewish comedians ahead of Seinfeld

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Groundbreaking Jewish comedians were stars of radio, TV
- Marx Brothers were the comedic equivalent of a tornado
- Sid Caesar was sax player in Coast Guard during World War II
- Henny Youngman was the king of the one-liners

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By Michael A. Stusser

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(Mental Floss) -- Handed down since Moses was kvetching about having to cross the desert in his bare feet, Jewish humor emanated from Eastern Europe where the Hebrews overcame some seriously hellacious circumstances on the way to the Promised Land. "Laughter through tears," they called it.

art.comedians.jpg



Milton Berle and Sid Caesar at the 1998 Emmy's Awards

Over the years it came in the form of slapstick (The Three Stooges), physical comedy (Jerry Lewis), smart-aleck observation (Norman Lear), occasional cruelty (Rodney Dangerfield), uncontrolled neurosis (Shelley Berman) and bemused irreverence (Jerry Seinfeld).

The religious theology itself also contributed to the craft, encouraging believers to question authority -- even God (Lenny Bruce) --and test audiences to the max (Don Rickles).

In the early 20th century, Jews used stand-up comedy to get out of tough, poor neighborhoods (and their overbearing mothers' living rooms). Kids with wicked senses of humor got on stage in vaudeville, at burlesque halls, Yiddish variety houses and resorts in the Catskills.

Then came radio, motion pictures and eventual spots on television where comics like Carl Reiner, Neil Simon and Mel Brooks defined today's talk shows and sitcoms.

So without further ado, we present: 10 Groundbreaking Jewish Comedians.

Sid Caesar (born 1922)

"The guy who invented the wheel was an idiot. The real genius was the guy who invented the other three."

"The trouble with telling a good story is that it invariably reminds the other fellow of a dull one."

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Hail Caesar! Sid Caesar, the man who basically invented live television sketch comedy, oddly enough started out as a sax player in the Coast Guard during World War II.

But when producer Max Liebman overheard some of Caesar's hilarious accents backstage at a show, he quickly cast him in a Broadway review and, in 1949, helped him land the starring spot on the big-budget variety program, "Admiral Broadway Review" (broadcast simultaneously on DuMont and NBC).

The series adopted the format of a Broadway show, with top-name guest stars acting in sketches and big production numbers -- the kind of genre-bending that would help to characterize Caesar's future

programs.



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The true "variety series" was born with Caesar's "Your Show of Shows," a Saturday night fixture in the early 1950s. The show adopted a format that mixed comedy monologues with skits and movie parodies -- the template for all future TV variety series.

The show featured a supporting cast led by Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner and Howard Morris, and an all-star team of writers including Mel Brooks, Neil Simon and Larry Gelbart (even you'd be funny with those guys working for ya). The show lasted until 1954 and earned Caesar an Emmy for Best Actor in 1952.

Milton Berle (1908 -- 2002)

"A good wife always forgives her husband when she's wrong."

Mr. Television, Uncle Miltie, Master of Timing, Thief of Bad Gags. Whatever you want to call the brash, cigar-toting comic, Milton Berle (born Mendel Berlinger) was single-handedly responsible for changing the entertainment business forever.

Berle started young. Before the age of eight he had earned bit parts in over 50 silent films (talk about an overbearing mother), appearing with stars like Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin. He went on to perform stand-up routines all over the country, appear on Broadway, and star with the Ziegfeld Follies in motion pictures in the 1930s and 1940s.

Always ready to try something new, Berle headed to Chicago in 1948 to do one of the first experimental television programs, "Texaco Star Theater." Basically vaudeville on the tube, the program was the perfect showcase for Berle's style of comedy and became the vehicle for his success.

The small screen's first big star, NBC dubbed him "Mr. Television." In fact, during TV's golden age, ratings soared so high that NBC signed him to a 30-year "lifetime" contract in 1951, which paid \$100,000 a year. No surprise, considering Berle attracted big-name sponsors and was responsible for selling a ton of television sets.

Within one season of his show, the number of TVs sold in America increased from 500,000 to one million. At this time, of course, NBC was owned by RCA, a leading electronics manufacturer.

In case you were wondering, Berle's nickname, "Uncle Miltie," was a tribute to his popularity with youngsters. Parents would complain that their kids wouldn't go to sleep until his show was over. One night he went on the air and told the children watching to "listen to their Uncle Miltie and go to bed right after the show," and the name stuck.

Henny Youngman (1906 -- 1998)

"A doctor gave a man six months to live. The man couldn't pay his bill, so he gave him another six months."

"What's the latest dope on Wall Street? My son!"

Henry "Henny" Youngman was the king of the one-liners. Known for his simple, rapid-fire jokes, his comedy barrage often sprayed 50 japes in an eight-minute routine.

As a young man (no pun intended), Youngman worked at a print shop. For fun, he wrote and printed a set of "Comedy Cards" -- a series of quick gags and jokes -- and advertised them in his store window. As luck would have it, Milton Berle (already a top comedian) was in town for a stand-up gig, saw the sign, and went into the store. This chance meeting initiated a lifelong friendship between the two comedians.

Youngman's big break came in 1937 when he was booked on the popular radio show "The Kate Smith Hour" and overstayed his welcome by two years.

He tried movies, but his rapid-fire style was better suited for the club circuit, and, over the next 40 years, he averaged over 200 performances a year. His famous one-liner, "Take my wife -- please," became so popular that it was included in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

But this famous line was purely for laughs; he and his wife, Sadie, were married for nearly 60 years until her death in 1987.

Groucho Marx (1890 -- 1977) and the Marx Brothers

"You've got beauty, style, money. You've got money, haven't you? If not we'll stop right now."

"Either he's dead or my watch has stopped."

The Marx Brothers were the comedic equivalent of a tornado: twisting, teasing and tearing down all the fair maidens, straight men and small children in their path. With an astonishing range of comic tools -- including a bicycle horn and a lot of zany wigs -- the real-life brothers created characters verbally and physically out of control, while also creating a brand of comedy that has lasted more than 70 years.

Groucho (born Julius Henry Marx) was the first of the brothers to start a stage career, entering the industry at age 15. Soon after, his brothers (Chico, Harpo, Gummo and, later, Zeppo) joined the act. Their first joint performance was in "Fun in Hi Skule" (1912), and the comedic chemistry was immediate.

The Marx Brothers went on to do "I'll Say She Is," followed by two more Broadway hits, "The Cocoanuts" and "Animal Crackers." In the latter, Groucho portrayed the character of Captain Spaulding, and it remained a Groucho trademark for the rest of his life. The brothers continued to create theatrical performances first (in order to work out the kinks in front of live audiences), then hit the big screen with perfected puns and timing.

From 1929 to 1947, they made 13 films. But after Chico and Harpo retired, Groucho began his radio career and hit it big with the comedy quiz show, "You Bet Your Life." The radio program started in 1947, moved to

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television three years later, and aired until 1961.

Andy Kaufman (1949 -- 1984)

"Sometimes, when you look Andy in the eyes, you get a feeling someone else is driving." --David Letterman

Andy Kaufman is probably best described as a performance artist, as many of his acts were more odd, scary, controversial or downright whacked than they were funny. Kaufman not only broke down the fourth wall, he kept on running.

Kaufman's career began officially in 1971 after Budd Friedman, owner of New York's original Improvisation Comedy Club, saw him doing stand-up (or something like it) in Long Island and took him under his wing.

Soon, Kaufman was performing his confusing and often confrontational act in both Los Angeles and New York. Kaufman's brand of comedy was unlike any other. In addition to blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, he often deliberately bombed performances, annoying audiences in the process. He was also known to nap on stage in a sleeping bag, read entire novels to the audience until they left (The Great Gatsby was his favorite prop), speak in nonsensical languages, and sing all of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" during a performance.

In 1975 NBC executive Dick Ebersol saw Kaufman's routine and invited him to audition for "Saturday Night Live." Although never a regular cast member, Kaufman went on to portray a host of notorious characters as a guest star on SNL, perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of which was the Intergender World Wrestling Champion.

This wildly chauvinistic combatant offered women \$1,000 if they could pin him in a wrestling match. As usual, the stunt stirred up serious controversy, especially among female viewers. In 1982 he entered into a bout with pro wrestler Jerry Lawler, with whom he later got into a heated argument on "Late Night with David Letterman." But, like many of Kaufman's acts, their feud was entirely staged.

That same year, SNL viewers voted 195,544 to 169,186 in a live, call-in ballot to keep Kaufman permanently off the show (though some say that even this poll was staged, and that they had no intention of ever inviting him back).

Kaufman's most famous role was that of Latka Gravas, an auto mechanic of indeterminate nationality, on the hit sitcom "Taxi," which ran from 1978 to 1983.

In December 1983, Kaufman was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer. Though some accused the consummate performer of faking his illness (he was not a smoker), he died on May 16, 1984, at the age of 35.

Mort Sahl (born 1927)

"Liberals feel unworthy of their possessions. Conservatives feel they deserve everything they've stolen."

With his casual attire and dead-on political commentary, Mort Sahl broke the slapstick mold, often shocking and confusing audiences in the process. Rather than tell fat jokes or do gags about chickens that cross the road, Sahl talked about things both relevant and local: your taxes, government leaders (or numb-nuts), school issues and, yes, even sex.

Sahl's conversational delivery contained both stream-of-consciousness ad-libbing and dead-on impressions of talking head newscasters. Part mental patient, part Freud, part coffeehouse conspirator, his routines poured out of him like free-form brainstorm.

Sahl was labeled "Will Rogers with fangs," as he often criticized everyone from the president on down-- unheard of in the 1950s. His jokes against Senator McCarthy, President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon were quoted in magazines all over the country, making him as influential as the leaders he satirized.

He was also one of the first comedians to have best-selling albums. At a time when topical humor couldn't be found on late night TV and political monologues hadn't yet seen the likes of Leno or Letterman, people bought his albums on a regular basis-- and he cranked them out almost as often as magazines went to print.

Sahl took no prisoners and had no favorites. When he began bashing President Kennedy after the election, the media shunned him and his popularity plummeted. Despite occasional television appearances in the 1960s, he struggled to find work.

Luckily, the tide turned against President Johnson and the Vietnam War, and Sahl's brand of satire was popular once again, enabling him to speak his mind before large audiences, but with the same clear vision.

Woody Allen (born 1935)

"What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet."

Woody Allen is known best for portraying the classic, neurotic schlemiel -- full of angst and psychoanalysis. With an amazingly independent career spanning nearly 40 years, Allen's films typically parody anything from Hassidic rabbis to losers in love, and his favorite preoccupation -- sophisticated New Yorkers.

What does Allen teach us? Well, for one thing, that internships work. Woody Allen got his start with the NBC Writer's Program where he wrote gags for "The Colgate Comedy Hour" and "Your Show of Shows." By 1960, he had begun his own successful career as a stand-up, honing what would become his famous bumbling, guilt-ridden, intellectual screen persona.

In 1964 "Woody Allen," a comedy album featuring his stammering stand-up act, was nominated for a Grammy Award. In 1965 he wrote his first screenplay, "What's New, Pussycat" (a film in which he also

starred). His follow-up, "What's Up, Tiger Lily?" (1966), established Allen as a cutting edge humorist and launched his career as a writer/director.

Allen's flicks have covered a wide variety of genres, from mockumentary ("Zelig") to full-blown comedies ("Sleeper," "Love and Death"), theatre-style dramas ("Interiors," "September"), musicals ("Everyone Says I Love You"), and humorous masterpieces ("Annie Hall," "Manhattan," "Hannah and Her Sisters").

Allen has been nominated for 20 Academy Awards (he won three) and nine Golden Globes. Though the Woodman's best work may very well be behind him, he's an icon, a comic, a genius and a legend.

Fanny Brice (1891 -- 1951)

"I never liked the men I loved, and never loved the men I liked."

At the age of 14, Fania Borach changed her name to escape being typecast in Jewish stage roles. Instead, she created an act based on smart parody, screwball dialect and physical humor.

Ironically, in 1909, she would make her first Broadway mark in a musical comedy, "The College Girls," using a put-on Yiddish accent to sing Irving Berlin's "Sadie Salome, Go Home" (Fanny only knew a few Yiddish words and didn't speak the language). The act brought down the house, and, despite her intent, Brice found her place as a "Jewish" entertainer.

Brice gained international stardom in the "Ziegfeld Follies of 1921." During the performance, she moved audiences to tears with her signature rendition of "My Man."

In an effort to succeed as a serious actress and singer, she had her nose surgically straightened in 1923 (making her a plastic surgeon pioneer, long before Jacko). But, despite her efforts, Brice rose to stardom performing comedy with her accentuated faux-Yiddish accent.

In 1938 Brice launched her own weekly radio show. A wonderful mimic and impersonator, she chose to limit herself to a single character, Baby Snooks, a precocious, bratty toddler without a trace of accent. Her enormously successful run on radio lasted until her death in 1951.

Gilda Radner (1946 -- 1989)

"What's all this fuss I hear about endangered feces? That's outrageous. Why is feces endangered? How can you possibly run out of such a thing? And besides, who wants to save that anyway?" (from SNL's "Emily Litella's Hearing Problem")

"Saturday Night Live" is considered one of the best television comedies of all time, and at its peak, Gilda Radner's zany slew of hilarious misfits made the show "must see TV." The hard-of-hearing Emily Litella, the tongue-tied Babwa Wawa, and the pathetic and loveable Lisa Loopner were legendary.

After a stint studying drama at the University of Michigan, Radner moved to Canada where she made her stage debut in Toronto in a production of "Godspell." Her cast mates included Martin Short, Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin.

The next year she began performing at Toronto's Second City comedy club with an improv group that included Levy, Dan Aykroyd and Brian Doyle-Murray. Keeping such good company, she soon left Canada for the Big Apple and was recruited by actor John Belushi (an alumnus of the original Second City in Chicago) for the "National Lampoon Radio Hour."

Radner was then asked to join producer Lorne Michaels' comedy-sketch television program called "Saturday Night Live," becoming the first performer signed to the new show. In order to return Belushi's favor of hiring her on the "Radio Hour," she insisted Belushi join the show along with her (Michaels didn't like him) -- and history was made. In 1978 she won an Emmy for her outstanding performances.

In 1979 Radner moved on to Broadway, writing and starring in "Gilda Radner: Live From New York." From 1980 to 1982, she was married to SNL guitarist G.E. Smith, but soon fell in love with (and married) actor Gene Wilder.

Radner appeared for the last time, as herself, on "It's Garry Shandling's Show" in 1988. She penned the autobiography It's Always Something (1989), about her struggles with ovarian cancer -- the audio book version of which posthumously won her a Grammy for Best Spoken Word Recording. On May 20, 1989, Radner died at the age of 42.

Lenny Bruce (1925 -- 1966)

"God made my body and if it is dirty then the fault lies with the Manufacturer, not the product. Do not remove this tag under penalty of law."

Lenny Bruce was known as a "dirty comic," and he has the history of censorship to prove it. Yet he saw his "shock value" as having a kind of cultural value as well. He violated every taboo he could find in an effort to open minds, question cultural mores of the time, and blast conformity.

It was an appearance on TV's "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts" that first brought Bruce national attention. Armed with anarchistic wit and salty speech, Bruce attacked anyone and everyone, including liberals trying to be "cool." One of his best shticks was "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties," playfully making fun of a good-hearted but inept white liberal trying to make small talk with a black pal at a cocktail party.

Bruce was first imprisoned in 1961 for using an obscenity in his act. Over the next three years he was arrested a half-dozen times and became obsessed with his legal fights. In some of his later performances, he would read aloud from the transcripts and proceedings from his trials (sort of like "Judge Judy," but funnier). In spite of pressures, Bruce refused to clean up his language.

Nearly every comedy club in America eventually blacklisted Bruce because they were afraid the authorities would revoke their licenses if he took the stage.

Denounced for blasphemy in Australia and banned from performing in England, he was arrested again for obscenity after a New York City show in 1964.

During the trial, Norman Mailer, James Jones and other prominent writers and intellectuals defended him as a social satirist "in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais and Twain."

In his later years Bruce became addicted to heroin and died of an overdose of the drug in 1966 at the age of 40. Though his comedic career was brief, his "new comedy of dissent" remains a force for satirists today.

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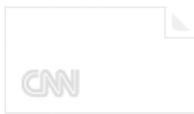
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