Announcer: *(while "I Really Like You" by Carly Rae Jepsen plays)* Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Comedy Bar, and to the book launch of *The Comedians* by Kliph Nesteroff! Brought to you by Humber Comedy! And now, please welcome to the stage, Andrew Clark and Kliph Nesteroff! (*applause, song fades out)*

Kliph Nesteroff: Ah, it's our song! They played our song, Andrew!

Andrew Clark: Great, yes!

KN: What the hell was that?

AC: Everybody knows you! We'll get right to the questions. This is a book that I thoroughly enjoyed. My only criticism is probably that I didn't get it for Christmas. It would've been a perfect Christmas present.

KN: Well, don't blame me!

AC: So I'll buy a second copy. So yeah, please welcome Kliph Nesteroff.

KN: Hey, everybody! *(applause)* What's up, Comedy Bar?

AC: I'd like to say he's someone Vice Magazine calls "The Human Encyclopedia of Comedy," that's what you've been described as.

KN: "The Human Encyclopedia of Comedy."

AC: You're from British Columbia.

KN: Originally, yes.

AC: And I think I read somewhere that as a kid, you had one of the world's largest collections of comedy albums, at least for your age bracket.

KN: Yeah, well not really as a kid, but as a teenager and then in my twenties, that was true, and then I used to do some stuff. I wore my CBC scarf, which I don't get to wear in America, it doesn't mean anything out there, plus it's too hot in Hollywood. But I used to play weird records on CBC all the time, and selections from that stuff, and I may or may not have stolen a couple records from the CBC record library. *(laughter)*

AC: Yeah, all right…

KN: Including a 1967 comedy LP by a guy named Lorne Lipowitz…

AC: Ah…

KN: Which was just sitting on the shelf. He had a big handlebar mustache…

AC: *The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour.*

KN: It was the precursor to that. It was collections from a radio show called *The Russ Thompson Show*, and it was Hart and Lorne, and the front cover was just the CBC butterfly logo, from the 60's, and there are only twelve copies in the world, because they were pressed internally for each CBC affiliate to promote *Hart and Lorne*. On the back, I remember the version that I stole, it had a Jiffy marker, or what do you call it, yeah, like Jiffy marker markings on the track listings, with a big arrow to one that was called "The Indian Reservation." That was the name of the routine. And then on it it said, "DO NOT PLAY ON AIR! DO NOT PLAY ON AIR!" *(laughter)* But yeah, I stole that. That was among the many…anyways, please continue.

AC: But then you set out with an interest in comedy as a performer. You went briefly, I guess, to Humber, right, in '99, briefly?

KN: Yeah, I've never told anybody that. *(laughter)*

AC: We're outing you. We're outing you.

KN: But yeah, I took that course at Humber and learned how to write a pretty solid *3rd Rock From the Sun* spec script. *(laughter)*

AC: Awesome, terrific. And then you went back to Vancouver and were doing standup. You had an alter ego, or you had two acts, as I understand it. Shecky Grey, right? And then the other was more in your own personality?

KN: Yeah, I did one act as Kliph Nesteroff, and then one act as Shecky Grey, and Shecky Grey, that character became really popular on the West Coast, it really did well for me. And then I did this other act as myself, under my own name, and everybody hated it. And it gave me sort of a weird complex, because when I did the Shecky Grey shows, people would chant the name, like, "Shecky! Shecky!" And then when I did Kliph Nesteroff, people would still chant, "Shecky! Shecky!" They didn't want to see me. I wanted to kill myself, basically, at that point. But the Shecky Grey act I did in Vancouver for several years, and it was very good to me.

AC: And was there a moment where you felt like, rather than being out there doing standup for X number of nights a week, you wanted to turn the lens on the comedians themselves? Your book is *The Comedians*. Was there a moment where you decided that's the direction you wanted to take, as a writer?

KN: No, because I probably would've kept doing standup, but I did it from '98 to 2006, but I quit because I was kind of stuck in Vancouver, and I was doing really well, but there's only so far you can go. It's such a small market. So I sort of hit that ceiling, so I was on the cover of *The Georgia Straight* there, and some of the other papers, but I wasn't making more money, the crowds were the same, and the venues were the same, so

that was a bit frustrating. At that time, I didn't have working papers in the United States, so I didn't have the luxury of fleeing to New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. If I had had that freedom, I bet I would've kept doing standup. But I didn't have that freedom, so it was just kind of like spinning out in the same place in Vancouver, so I kind of slowly but surely killed it off.

And I very dramatically killed off my act in Vancouver, when I was doing this character Shecky Grey, who was this angry old bitter insult comedian. For the last show, we had a roast at this dive bar in Vancouver, and it was great. Everybody I'd ever done a show with was there. It was a great event. A few weeks earlier, Zach Galifianakis, who was living in Vancouver at the time, and we'd done a lot of standup shows together, I'd booked him on my show, and nobody showed up. He wasn't a movie star quite yet. But he had done some film shoot in North Vancouver, and a prop guy, as a present, gave him this suitcase full of candy-glass breakaway bottles, that they use as props. So he went up onstage, and this is at a different show, he went up onstage and he told a joke and it didn't work, and he picked up this bottle, it looked like a Heineken bottle, and he goes, "Fuck!" SMASH! *(laughter)* Right into his own head. And I thought that was so funny. And he had a whole suitcase of them, so I asked Zach if I could have one of these bottles, so he gave me one.

So for my last-ever show as Shecky Grey, I had a guy in the audience planted with one of these bottles, and I said, "At the end of the show, I want you to heckle, and we'll get into a fight, and I want you to rush the stage and hit me in the face, and I'll die." And I said, "But you just have to tap me, because they shatter real easily. You don't have to hit me hard, but be really careful, because it's a long show, and I don't want the thing

to break in advance." Finally it gets to the end of the show, it's packed in there, and I was worried it was gonna look too fake. I also bought this fake stage blood at a film place, like an off-sale place, and it was in North Vancouver, and they said, "What kind of blood do you want? Do you want it to be fast-moving blood, dark blood?" So they got me this crazy-looking stuff. It was like $100 for the little vial. You put a dab on your forehead and it just sits there, and then it slowly starts to come down your face. So I got that stuff. But I was afraid it was gonna look too fake.

Anyway, it gets to the end of the show. My friend was in the audience, he heckled me, we get in this argument, he rushes the stage, smashes me as hard as he can in the face, knocks me over, and then I'm under the dais and I put the dab up, and I don't hear anybody laughing or anything, I just hear silence. *(laughter)* And I came up, and everybody like gasped as this blood started to roll down. And then I found out later they had phoned the police on my friend, and they dragged him out. *(laughter)* They thought it was a real assault. And then Graham Clark, who's a Canadian comedian, I'm sure many people know him, he was hosting the show, he was the roast master, and we had a comedian at the back of the room, this guy Aubrey Tennant, who was posing as a doctor. He's wearing a white smock, and he was gonna pronounce me dead. And so Graham had this line after I'm bleeding, and he's supposed to yell to the audience, "Is there a doctor in the house?" So Graham goes, "Is there a doctor in the house?" And Aubrey's supposed to go, "I'm a doctor," and run up. But there's nothing, and we both can see in the back of the room, he's in his doctor's smock, and he's got his arm against the wall, and he's hitting on a girl. *(laughter)* He wasn't even paying attention. And Graham goes, "Aubrey Tennant, that's your cue! Is there a doctor in the house?" And finally he goes, "Oh, I'm a

doctor," and he ran up. And then everybody realized it was a shtick. And he pronounced me dead, and these two guys from Vancouver Coroner Service came with a gurney and they strapped me in, and they lifted me up above their heads, and everybody chanted Shecky's name. They took me out to this hearse, and that was my last show. But yeah, it was a great night.

AC: I think one of the things that people love about your book, for instance, is that in your first chapter about vaudeville, you talk about the comedian who was one of the first people to have hecklers planted in the audience…

KN: Oh that's right, yeah.

AC: That, for me, was very interesting. You also talk about Frank Fay. Can you talk a little about him, and his influence on standup?

KN: I'll talk about both of those, Frank Fay and the hecklers. He used hecklers too, but at the time, a planted heckler in vaudeville was called a "stooge," and that's where the phrase for The Three Stooges came from, because the leader of The Three Stooges was this guy Ted Healy, and he'd have the Stooges planted in the audience, and then bring them up onstage and abuse them and stuff. That's where the phrase comes from, the stooges. And likewise, the template from *The Muppet Show* of Statler and Waldorf, that was very common in vaudeville, to have a guy in a box seat heckling the comedian onstage, and it would be the heckler who got the laughs, the planted guy, and the

comedian became the straight guy. Milton Berle did that in the ‘60’s on his later TV show.

But this guy Frank Fay in vaudeville was sort of considered the first true standup comedian, because before him, comedians mostly were in a team, or they used props, or they dressed up in a costume, they played a character, and Frank Fay had done that too, but he didn’t really like the gimmick aspect of it. So he decided he would go up onstage dressed the same way he’d be dressed offstage and talk onstage the same way he would talk offstage. It seems like a no-brainer, but this was a revolutionary thing at the time. When he first started doing standup as a solo act, just in a suit, carnation in his lapel, he was heavily criticized. He got terrible reviews, and they said things like, “Frank Fay needs a proper straight man in order to support his comedy act. He needs props. A comedian is nothing without props.” Which is a weird thing. Now we look down upon that, but at the time it was revolutionary. So he was heavily criticized initially, but slowly but surely, people returned to this new approach, and he became heavily influential. There were other guys that started to copy him. This guy Julius Tannen, who’s very obscure (now), became a big star emulating Frank Fay. But then Milton Berle, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Jack Paar, they all fashioned their standup act after Frank Fay. No more costumes, no more blackface, no more roller skates, baggy pants, seltzer bottles. That slowly started to ebb away, and it was all because of this guy Frank Fay.

Now, Frank Fay was also a controversial figure, because he was a virulent anti-Semite as well, at a time when most of these comedians were Jewish, and Milton Berle told a story, Milton Berle was a big fan of Frank Fay, and apparently, at one vaudeville show he was standing in the wings watching Frank Fay, admiring his hero at work. Frank

Fay, out of his peripheral vision, saw Milton Berle in the wings, and he yelled at a stagehand, “Get that Jew kid out of the wings!” And so Milton Berle was infuriated by this, and when Frank Fay came offstage, Milton Berle was waiting with a stage brace from a piece of set prop, and smashed him in the face and tore open his nose, broke his nose. But that was just the first of many incidents involving Frank Fay and his racism. He became one of the most widely loathed men in show business. That’s why he’s widely forgotten, because when people were moving into movies, they didn’t really want to deal with Frank Fay, because he was this terrible racist.

AC: Your book spans an enormous amount of time. It’s very comprehensive. One of the currents that does run through it, though, is this idea of it being a very difficult life. The conditions for the vaudeville performers, and the violence—I think Joe E. Lewis worked with the mob.

KN: Yeah.

AC: They had very difficult lives, and they sort of risked bodily harm quite frequently, it seems like.

KN: Well, yeah. In the post-vaudeville days, when prohibition ended in 1933, as we know, most of the booze runners throughout the twenties were the mob. When Prohibition ended, they had all these speakeasies full of liquor-serving accoutrements, or at least weren’t profitable, because now you could get booze anywhere. So they turned

them into nightclubs. So there was this natural evolution into the era of nightclubs in the 1930's, 40's and 50's. Most of the nightclubs in America were now run by the Mafia or the mob. So nine times out of ten, if you were a standup comic in the 1930's, 40's, 50's or 60's, your boss was the mob, which is kind of a crazy, perilous thing if your job is to ridicule people. You gotta be kind of careful who you're making fun of. A lot of these comedians have these stories about almost getting killed or assaulted. Milton Berle has a story about having a fork punctured up into his chin when he insulted the wrong man.

Joe E. Lewis is a famous example. He's a forgotten comedian today, but in the late twenties, he was playing at a place called The Green Mill in Chicago, which was owned by Al Capone's mob. And he was kind of an amateur comic at the time, Joe E. Lewis, and he had been working at this club for a little while. He decided to take another gig across the street without permission. His bosses said, "You cannot do that. We didn't give you permission to leave this venue and go work there." And Joe E. Lewis said, "I don't need your permission," and they said, "Yes, you do." He was kind of naïve. So to teach him a lesson, they slit his throat. The only reason he didn't die is because blood was pouring down the hallway from under his door in his rooming house, and somebody found him just in time. But his vocal cords were severed, so he couldn't talk anymore, which meant he couldn't perform.

He eventually recovered. It took about four or five years, and when he did he had this incredible, fleshy scar from one ear all the way across his throat. But since he was weaned in Chicago in those days, he refused to name his assaulters. And eventually, he did regain the ability to speak, eventually he did start doing standup again, and oddly, because of that, he won the respect of every Mafioso in America. They said, "Here's a

guy who's a survivor *and* he didn't squeal. This is a good guy!" *(laughter)* So he became *the* mob comedian *(laughter)*, and Joe E. Lewis headlined every major mob nightclub in America for the next thirty years—Ciro's in Los Angeles, the Copacabana in New York, El Rancho in Las Vegas, and he died in the early seventies. *(Adopts very raspy tone)* And he had a voice like this. Because he had had his throat cut. So yeah, he's completely forgotten, but because of that, all these standup comedians that followed kind of heeded that warning. They didn't fuck with the mob. They didn't dis them, they didn't disagree with them, they just accepted it as a fact of life. If you wanted to do standup in those days, you had to. You had to accept that.

AC: The genesis for the book came out of your work writing at WFMU and their blog. Can you tell us a bit about how that started and how you research it? There's a lot of history written down about film, about theater, music, but when it comes to comedy, it was never really considered an art form worth preserving. So it's a huge challenge for you as a writer. You really have to find the living version of it, because there's not a whole lot written down, except for, say, *Variety*.

KN: Right, that's true. I'm a little bit of a fraud, because the old guys, when I'll interview them, they'll be like, "How do you know all this shit?" And I'm sitting in front of my laptop on the phone *(laughter)*, and it's all right there, but they don't know how to use the laptop. *(laughter)* I'll be like, "You played the town casino in Buffalo in 1961." "How did you know that?" It's in the Google news archive right here, I'm looking at it. So it's not that difficult for me. For some reason, I have a knack for finding things. I don't know

why. When I was researching the book, I did use the *Variety* archives, which was a pay-only service, but an indispensable service. But frequently, if I was researching one thing, on the same page there'd be another article that would perk my interest. I'd be like, "Well, what's *that* all about?" So there are all these wormholes you'd fall down.

But one of the first articles I ever wrote for WFMU, certainly the first one I ever wrote about comedy for WFMU on their website, was about this guy named Murray Roman, who was very obscure, and not to be confused with Freddie Roman, who runs the Friar's Club. This guy Murray Roman was sort of a hippie standup comic in the late sixties, and I had found this LP in the Vancouver flea market that he put out called *You Can't Beat People Up and Have Them Say I Love You.* (*laughter)* It had this cover that was like kaleidoscopic, with five images of his head, and he's wearing tinted glasses. We listened to the record, and it's all him going, "Man, you know, there was this groovy guy smokin' bananas." *(laughter)* And then he would hit a punch line, and there'd be all this reverb, and then music would come in, and it would fade out, and he'd do the next routine about police brutality. And I was like, "Wow, this is such a weird comedy record." And then the liner notes were written by Tommy Smothers.

So I think around 2006, the Smothers Brothers came through town, and I got to meet them, and I was backstage, and I said to Tommy Smothers, "I got this record by this guy Murray Roman. Who is he? It's such a strange thing." He says, "Oh, Murray was a writer on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,* but he died really young in a car accident while he was the opening act for The Who." And I thought, "Wow, that's really kind of an interesting little lost cause." So a couple months later, I decide, "Oh, I'll write about that," and I could upload the record too, and make it like an interactive thing on the

WFMU website. And for people who don't know, WFMU is this radio station in the States that has a cult following, and they often resurrect really obscure things, and weird records and stuff. So it was the perfect fit.

I phoned Tommy Smothers and reminded him who I was, said I wanted to do this thing about Murray Roman, so he consented to an interview, and the first person I interviewed was Tommy Smothers. Towards the end of the interview, he goes, "You know, Kliph, I don't know as much as I'd like to give you, but you know who would know more about this than me is Steve. Have you talked to Steve yet?" And I said, "Steve?" He goes, "Steve Martin. He was Murray's writing partner on the Smothers Brothers show." And I go, "No, I haven't talked to him yet." *(laughter)* "I was gonna, but the number, I don't know where I put it." So he goes, "Well, let me call him, and I'll get him to call you."

I was in my Vancouver apartment on Commercial Drive, in my underwear. I was making fake transit passes, that's how I made my living. *(laughter)* And the phone rings. "Hi, Kliph?" "Yes." "Steve Martin." And we talked for like 45 minutes about Murray Roman. Towards the end of the interview, he goes, "Who else are you writing about? I'm into a lot of those old guys." And he starts talking about this obscure comedian called Jackie Vernon, who was a Dean Martin…*(laughter) (to audience)* This guy. "Oh, wow!" One guy. You and Steve Martin would get along. Anyways, we're nerding out. I'm nerding out with Steve Martin about Jackie Vernon, and then I wrote the article, and I talked to Bob Einstein and Mason Williams and some of the other *Smothers Brothers* writers about him, and I put the article online.

It was not a very good article. If you search hard enough, you can find it, but it's really not worth it. But at the same time, I realized, wow, that was just like a random thing, but it led to Steve Martin. And I only realize this now with perspective, because now, writing this book and doing this research, I've spent time with all of my heroes, you know, whether it's doing a show with Mel Brooks, or hanging out with Albert Brooks. It's miraculous. And I realize that if I'd been doing standup all this time, I don't think that ever would have happened. I don't think I would be hanging out with Mel Brooks or Albert Brooks or have the respect of Steve Martin. So it was kind of a valuable lesson. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew that I was doing something that was getting attention from people I admired.

The next article I wrote about comedy was about this guy Dick Davy, again inspired by a comedy record I had found. I couldn't find anything on a Google search about him, but his standup record was fantastic. He was a white guy who headlined the Apollo in 1965, and he played a bit of a dumb cracker from the south. But all of his jokes were kind of progressive. He was the joke. I don't know how to explain it, but he was a great comedian. And so, same thing, I tried my best to research this, and one of the creators of *The Wire*, who has since passed away, sent me a fan letter after that. So it was just a symbol to me that I was doing the right thing, because I was getting attention from all of these people I was impressed by. So I just stuck with it, but that was the germination.

AC: It's sort of like a chain. One of the guys that you talk about that I don't think most people have heard of is Ray Bourbon, a contemporary of Lenny Bruce's. Can you tell us about him? He's fascinating.

KN: Yeah, Ray Bourbon's interesting. Again, I found that record at the Vancouver flea market. This guy Ray Bourbon put out twelve LP's on his own label, because nobody else would have pressed them. The record I found had him on the cover. It was from the early fifties or mid-fifties. On the cover, he's dressed in drag, and the title of it was *Let Me Tell You About My Operation.* (*laughter*) This was the fifties, you know? And again, not a famous guy, really kind of obscure, but really interesting. And you listen to the record, and it's all about homosexuality, and it was jokes. He was getting laughs. It was taped in a nightclub. And I found that really interesting.

I didn't know much about him for a long time. Then I interviewed this guy Woody Woodbury and asked, "Who was Ray Bourbon?" And he goes, "Oh, he used to perform at a place called the Jewel Box. It was a gay nightclub, but straight comedians would go and watch him, because he was a great performer." And when I researched his life, it was fascinating. He was getting busted all the time for obscenity around the same time as Lenny Bruce. But he was not swearing onstage. He was talking about being gay. But that was considered obscene. And I found it really kind of weird and sad. He was an underground guy always. He mostly played gay nightclubs. But Milton Berle, as I'm sure many of you know in the mid-fifties, was a huge star on TV dressing in drag all the time, and it was a big joke for him to come out in lipstick and a dress. Milton Berle used to go to gay nightclubs in New York and study drag queens, and that's where he got the idea to

do drag on TV. At the same time that Milton Berle's on the cover of *Time Magazine* for doing that kind of thing, Ray Bourbon was serving time in jail. He got busted at a show and was charged—this was a crime at the time—he got charged with impersonating a woman. And he served a month in jail. So I found that really, really interesting.

And the other interesting thing is that here's a guy who was ahead of his time, talking about being gay onstage, but it was also sort of like a flamboyant gay character he was doing. So by the time that gays started to become a force in the late sixties at the same time that there was black power and red power and Chicano power and women's rights, Ray Bourbon was rejected by the gay community because they felt that he was making them look bad as a stereotype. So his time was there finally, and yet he couldn't be a part of it, and his time was too early and he's being thrown in jail. So he never had the right time, this guy Ray Bourbon. Eventually, he went to prison for murder, but that's a different story. *(laughter)* It's in the book.

AC: But that also leads with comedy, in the music business there was segregation and different worlds, and it was the same with comedy, like with the chitlin circuit, which you talk about a lot in the book. A comedian like Red Foxx (for instance). Can you tell us a little bit about how that was finally able to be broached, if you will?

KN: The chitlin circuit is interesting. People know that phrase, they know the chitlin circuit, they may or may not know what that means. They know it has something to do with black performers. The phrase "chitlin circuit" itself is a joke. They were making fun of the phrase "borscht belt." Black comedians said, "We'll call it the 'chitlin circuit.'" It

was separate but equal. There were places where black performers performed for a black audience. And while a lot of orchestras and band leaders like Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and Count Basie were accepted to perform for a white audience, in those days it was not OK for a black comedian to perform for a white audience, because a comedian onstage is superior to the audience. So there was this thing that a black person shouldn't be telling people in the white crowd what to think, or their opinion. So the chitlin circuit was sort of the alternative to that.

There were big stars on the chitlin circuit in comedy. A guy named Pigmeat Markham, a woman named Moms Mabley, who still is pretty hilarious. And Red Foxx came later. Red Foxx started standup in the late forties. I found an incredible clipping when I was researching the book from 1949 about Red Foxx getting arrested in New Jersey. The opening paragraph says something like, "Friends always wondered how comedian John 'Foxy' Sanford could afford two Cadillacs. They found out the other day when he was busted for…" I can't remember the number of pounds of marijuana, but he was dealing pot, and he got arrested, and one of the people he was dealing pot with, before he was famous, was Malcolm X. They were buddies, and they used to break into this dry cleaner's in Harlem at night, steal the dry cleaning off the rack, and then sell the suits the next day down the street. *(laughter)* So he was always a street hustler. But he started standup in the late forties. He moved to Los Angeles in the early fifties. He hooked up with Slappy White, who's a forgotten African-American comedian. They did a comedy team, Red and White. They did a lot of pot humor very early on.

But they played a lot of what we call "presentation houses," or what I call "presentation houses." It's kind of a forgotten term. There were black presentation

houses, and there were white presentation houses. What those were, in the years after vaudeville folded, there were these empty theaters that got converted into movie houses. Most people know that before the movie in those days, there were a cartoon and newsreel, but what a lot of people don't realize is that they would also have a 45-minute stage show, with an orchestra, a dance team, a singer, and a comedian. Some of these theaters were very famous, especially the ones in New York, with names like the Paramount, the Strand, the Roxy, Radio City Music Hall, the Capitol, Loew's State. And each of them had a deal with the major film studios to show the movies. So the Paramount showed Paramount movies, Loew's State showed MGM movies, the Roxy showed RKO movies. But all of these stages also had a comedian beforehand. And there were a lot of these black theaters as well in downtown Los Angeles, and that's where Red Foxx got his initial stage time, was doing these presentation house theaters.

Now, Red Foxx is responsible for a lot of firsts, and he doesn't get the credit. I argue in my book that he's one of the most influential standup comedians of the 20th century, for a couple of reasons. In 1966, he became the first African-American comedian to headline a Vegas hotel, the Aladdin. In 1967 he became the first African-American business owner in Beverly Hills, running a club called The Red Foxx Club. But most importantly, in 1956, he put out the first standup comedy record. Now, you could mince the definition of a comedy record, because before there had been novelty LP's by Stan Freberg, Spike Jones and (His) City Slickers. On 78, they put out some radio shows and stuff like that. But nobody had just recorded their standup act and put it out until 1956.

This guy Dootsie Williams was a black record proprietor in South Central Los Angeles who made a lot of money in '54 with a huge hit record, a doo-wop song called

"Earth Angel" by The Penguins. So he had all this expendable income. So he took a risk on Red Foxx, and wanted to see if there was a market for standup comedy on vinyl. When he first suggested it to Red Foxx, he said, "I don't want to do that, because if people buy my act, then they'll never come to my show again, because they own my act." But then six days later, Red Foxx was broke, and he went back to Dootsie Williams and said, "What was that you were saying about the record?"

So they put it out, and it became a huge underground hit, so much so that they cranked out another one, and another one, and another one, and between 1956 and 1958, before any white comedian, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, before any white comedian put out standup on vinyl, between '56 and '58, Red Foxx had put out ten LP's and four EP's, and nobody ever mentions that. You'll hear Mort Sahl say, "I was the first person to put out a comedy record," and everybody goes, "All right, Mort Sahl was the first." But because Red Foxx was black, *Billboard, Cash Box,* all these trade publications didn't really chart it. It was considered kind of an underground thing. But in the black market, he was selling millions of copies. The only people that noticed this were the white record labels: Capitol, Verve, Warner Bros. And that's why they were signing up comedians, and it exploded. It turned into a huge craze. And arguably, it turned people like the Smothers Brothers and Jonathan Winters into big stars.

AC: And that's another thing you explore in the book, which is how twists that are completely removed from, say, the art of comedy change the business itself dramatically. Law enforcement trying to clamp down on mob-run clubs around America leads the mob to go, "Well, you know what? We're going to Las Vegas." And then you talk about how

they basically create Vegas, and the Vegas comedy scene. The lounge scene, it seems to me, in your book, it seems like one of the pivotal moments for comedy.

KN: Yeah, because it helped change the style. For a long time, comedy was very scripted, by rote, and in the thirties and forties a comedian went up onstage, and you knew exactly where he was gonna start and where he was gonna end. That still happens to an extent today, but back then it was even less loose, and guys didn't talk about themselves onstage. They talked about, "Didja hear the one about the guy and the girl walkin' down the street? Seems there was this girl," you know, and it started like that. Then, in the early fifties, in the coffeehouse scene, Lenny Bruce started saying things like, "Hey man, I was walking down the street with this girl." And it seems like s subtle difference, but it was like profound at the time.

So the same scene with the lounge comedians, the first couple lounge comedians included Shecky Greene and Don Rickles at the Sahara Hotel. That was actually the first club to really put in lounge comedy. The Tropicana may have been the first to have a lounge with music. But in the lounge, the stakes were much lower. In the show room, you had to keep to your time, because the mafia did not want people away from the gambling tables for too long. The longer a comedian was onstage, the more potential money they were losing in the casino. But the lounge, you could just do a show whenever, because there were slot machines in the lounge, and it was kind of the area where you crossed over to get to the showroom. So the restrictions were much looser, and so comedians used it as a place to improvise. Don Rickles and Shecky Greene would improvise. And Don Rickles really kind of made his name in the lounge, because in Vegas there were

always celebrities walking through those lounges to get to the show, to get to the hotel, and he would pick on the celebrities, and that became one of his big shticks. But yeah, the lounge was important in terms of making standup a little bit looser, and a little bit more improvisational, and a lot more creative.

AC: It's interesting that they were able to then transition that into, say, the Comedy Store and the Improv later on. It seems like, when the Comedy Store finally happens, or becomes a big thing, if you will, later on in the seventies, they're tapping into that lounge thing. That's basically transposed. Is that right?

KN: In a big way. It's one genre affecting the next. We all still, in the comedy world, feel the ramifications of Lenny Bruce, and I think it's hard sometimes to convince young people why Lenny Bruce was important, because I think the argument is wrong. They say he was the first to break boundaries about language and religion, and that's true, but when you listen to the material and try to expose somebody young to it, it doesn't really hold up to them, they can't relate to it. But for me, what I really think the most important thing about Lenny Bruce was, it was not the content, it was the style. He was no longer the by-rote guy. He was a guy who would go onstage and search for the laughs as he sort of improvised his thoughts. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't, but that's how a lot of comedians create their act now. They whittle it down until they find where the laughs are. They improvise onstage. They're not called improv comics, but they're not memorizing a joke book as once happened.

So Lenny Bruce led to the next generation, which of course was the Robert Kleins, who were just on the cusp of the comedy club generation, and then the Improv, and this place called Pip's, which is kind of forgotten, I talk about it in my book, and the Comedy Store. So very much so. It really did lead to that, yeah.

AC: Music seems to play a big role, with jazz influencing Lenny Bruce, and other people like that, and then alternative comedy is taking its name directly from alternative music.

KN: Yeah, alternative comedy in the nineties was kind of a takeoff on the alternative music category, where you'd find your Nirvana cassettes. But yeah, music has always kind of connected to comedy in a number of ways. But back then, in the fifties, with the exception of television, every artistic movement in America, every genre, was changing.

So jazz music, bop music, was this revolutionary thing. In literature, the beat generation was this revolutionary thing. And it was the same with standup, and it often is neglected or forgotten, but it was aligned, and a lot of the venues that the new guys like Jonathan Winters and Dick Gregory and Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, a lot of the venues they were playing coincided with that. They had a very literate, cerebral audience that was into literature. Often, they were opening the show for Roland Kirk, or somebody like that, or Charlie Parker. Or folk musicians, the folk movement of the late fifties and early sixties was connected. And a lot of comedians came out of that folk movement, including the Smothers Brothers, and Woody Allen was always connected with folk musicians. The guy who cowrote *Annie Hall, Sleeper* and *Manhattan* was this guy named Marshall Brickman, who ghostwrote Woody Allen's standup act in the sixties. The vodka routine,

if you know Woody Allen's standup act was ghostwritten by this guy Marshall Brickman. He was just a folk musician who happened to be funny. So there was this alignment between comedy and music, both in terms of venue and also kind of temperament.

AC: You mentioned television. One of the things I think you do very well in the book, and I don't know exactly how to describe it, but it's such a powerful medium that almost burned through everyone, particularly in the early days, who starred on it. I'm thinking about Jack Paar, Milton Berle. They wanted that sort of stardom, but it seemed to just chew through, and it continues as you go through (the book).

KN: It was interesting, because Milton Berle became a huge star in TV in 1948, and just a totally irrelevant fact that seems to have been lost to history is that when he started hosting *The Texaco Star Theater*, he wasn't *the* host, he was one of four rotating hosts. There was Jack Carter, this guy Georgie Price, and Morey Amsterdam. They rotated with Milton Berle for the first six months before they finally settled on Berle. But Milton Berle was great for early TV because he had such confidence, and such bravado, and most people on TV in '48 didn't know where to look, they were nervous, they were shaky, they just didn't know how to work with cameras. And here comes this guy who's just like, boom. He has so much confidence. So he became a huge star. But once other people were introduced to TV who had ability, people like Sid Caesar, or Ernie Kovacs, or Steve Allen, then Milton Berle's fame and popularity totally disappeared, because people realized, "Oh, Milton Berle's actually kinda shit." *(laughter)* "Here we thought he was great, and now we see these other guys that are much better."

Because Milton Berle was just doing his nightclub act on TV, really. It was still all the same stock lines he would use for the rest of his life. He'd have some guy backstage intentionally drop something so he could go, "Oh, sounds like NBC just dropped another show!" Or he'd go to so somebody at the front of the stage, and Rickles does this too, Rickles will address a black man in the audience when there's no black man there. *(laughter)* Berle would do this too. He'd go, "Excuse me, sir, are you in show business? Then get your foot off the stage!" He did that line for years and years. He was still doing that shit on TV, and it eventually became kind of tiring. Guys like Phil Silvers came in, Sid Caesar, they brought a new dynamic and level to television that had not been there before, and because of that Berle kind of petered out. It did burn out a lot of people, this need for material. Also, it was the first era of mass recognition for fame, not for movie stars, but for comedians. You could be a big star in vaudeville, but if you hadn't played the west coast, and only the east coast, you could walk around in total anonymity. Television eventually changed that. And I forgot my point. *(laughter)*

AC: You covered a lot of time. Is there an era that you would've liked to have been around for, that you would've liked to have been there covering?

KN: Oh man, all of them. I never got to see Richard Pryor in his prime. I never got to see George Carlin in his prime. I'm friends with George Carlin's daughter, you'll appreciate this. I went to a Labor Day barbecue at George Carlin's daughter's house, and I'm sitting at the kitchen table eating potato salad, and there's this old woman next to me. You know who she was? Lord Buckley's daughter. Lord Buckley was this beatnik comedian that

inspired George Carlin. So I would've loved to have seen people like that, George Carlin, in their prime. If I were to take a time machine, I'd like to see Richard Pryor around 1970, '71, right when he's trying to figure things out and become the new, honest, raw Richard Pryor. There's some film footage that is often painful to watch, because he's talking about being molested as a child, and the audience is so uncomfortable, and he's kind of cussing them out as they walk out. I would've loved to have seen that, to see Richard Pryor at two in the morning struggling to break through to that new level of honesty.

AC: Is there a comedian from the past who you couldn't interview because they're no longer with us that you would give anything to actually sit down with?

KN: Ooh, that's a good question. I really am sad that I never got to sit down with George Carlin, because he was a big comedy nerd. He also documented his entire career. Now I have access to his notebooks and stuff, and that's cool, but I would've loved to have gone through it with him, because he was a big acidhead, I was a big acidhead. I feel like we would've got along really well. I tell this story in the book, but when George Carlin first did LSD, it was onstage. He dropped acid in Chicago, and then did a show at Mr. Kelly's. I have the review in *Variety* from that gig, and it says, "Carlin was his usual hilarious self, but seemed a trifle under the weather." *(laughter)* Carlin documented his whole career. He would write which city he was in, the name of the gig, and give a star rating or write a little note. But when he did that engagement at Mr. Kelly's, he did four shows that week, and in the notebook there's one page where it doesn't have anything lined up. It

just says, “ACID.” *(laughter)* So he’s a guy I wish I could’ve just sat down and done acid with, actually.

AC: In the book, it seems like weed and acid are like a one-two punch, and a big part of that comedy is totally hooked into drug culture.

KN: Well, it inspired a lot of people. People talk about how George Carlin changed at the end of the sixties, and how Richard Pryor changed at the end of the sixties. And inevitably, when we talk about the greatest comedians of all time, it’s subjective, but inevitably George Carlin and Richard Pryor are right at the top of that list. And both of them had their epiphany around the same time. The Smothers Brothers too. They had all been kind of funny, inoffensive, clean comedians. George Carlin, the Smothers Brothers, Richard Pryor. If you watch their stuff from the early and mid-sixties, it’s great, it’s really good, but it’s not the Carlin or Richard Pryor that we think of when we think of them now.

But around ’67, ’68, ’69, all those guys started smoking a lot of pot, and they all started doing a lot of LSD, and I don’t editorialize in the book, but there is a section in there, if you’re reading between the lines, which is a whole pro-acid section. And it’s a strong argument. I think that if it were not for those experiences that they had where it kind of reset or reformed their neuropathways, they may not have turned into the aphrodites of comedy that they were. Now, you would argue against that as well, but I think it is an interesting thing that the late-sixties produced so many brilliant artists who were into that thing, and a lot of them, like Willie Nelson, who had been a clean-cut

songwriter for Faron Young and Patsy Cline, turns into this hippie that we all adore after he starts doing acid. So it was not an uncommon thing at that time.

But I find that quite fascinating, and I think also marijuana, like with jazz musicians, is very common with standup comics. I would say the majority of standup comics are pot smokers. Certainly not all, but I would actually say the majority are. And I find that very interesting. There seems to be some kind of connection of play and fun and the leap of logic to an absurd place that goes along with it. So I find that all very compelling.

AC: In the book, one of the things that you show quite clearly is how there is a long period of transition generally. Jerry Seinfeld starts out saying, in his early act, "Fuck this, fuck that," and then makes a conscious decision. Objectively speaking, do you look at comedy and go, OK, it's probably this long to incubate, come out of the chrysalis, and then there's a comedian at the end of it? Is there a length of time that you'd say…

KN: I don't know that there's a length of time, but usually people that are funny can identify somebody else who's funny right away. I was talking about this last night at my show in Montreal, that there are guys that the audience does not understand. They think, and surely there are others that do understand, but the group think of an audience, if they see a comedian onstage, and he's bombing and getting no laughs, the conclusion is that he isn't funny. And if you're in an audience and everybody's laughing, and the guy's killing, the conclusion is that that guy's hilarious. But a comedian, or somebody that's born funny, is way more objective. They can tell that the guy who's bombing, he's not

getting any laughs, but he's a funny guy. He's just bombing. And there are reasons for why he might be bombing, but it doesn't mean he's not funny. And likewise, there could be a guy onstage who's killing, but he's just doing a Christopher Walken impression. He's not funny. He's just doing a Christopher Walken impression. *(laughter)* So there are gimmicks that can be employed to get laughs without you actually being funny. And likewise, there are circumstances in which you will bomb and die a horrible death, even though you're hilarious. Again, I forgot my point. *(laughter)*

AC: Well, we're talking about the growth of a comedian, but in the book, there's someone who gets a note, maybe it was from Lenny Bruce, (reading) "Your turn will come."

KN: Oh, Joan Rivers. Yeah, Joan Rivers was onstage at the Upstairs at Downstairs, this club in New York. By the way, the Upstairs at Downstairs is very muddled with its history, because it had two floors, like this place. If you performed upstairs, they called it the Upstairs at the Downstairs, and if you performed on the ground floor, it was called The Downstairs at the Upstairs. So when you go through the history books, nobody makes that distinction, and it becomes all confusing and stuff. Joan Rivers used to perform, I think upstairs, and Lily Tomlin simultaneously would perform on the ground floor, all in the late sixties, '65 through '69. That was their homeroom. Joan Rivers was already a bit of a star, but Lily Tomlin wasn't, and Joan Rivers took her under her wing.

At the Upstairs at the Downstairs, she was bombing one night, Joan Rivers, and Lenny Bruce came in, and he was standing at the back of the room, and Lenny Bruce

thought Joan Rivers was hilarious, but nobody was laughing. So he wrote her a little note, and had it sent backstage, and he left without even saying hello. But it said, “They’re wrong, you’re right. Lenny.” And she said that that kept her going for a couple years when she was really struggling. She kept it in her pocket and would look at that.

AC: You write about the “sick” comedians of the 1960’s, the infamous *Time Magazine* cover, right? Do you think we’ll ever reach a point where they stop writing that kind of stuff? They’ll write that now about Doug Stanhope or somebody.

KN: Right. “Have they gone too far? Is nothing sacred?”

AC: Is that a complete construct of the media, or is it a necessary thing in comedy?

KN: No, I think it really is a media thing. There’s this controversy, non-controversy right now about PC political correctness, which I think is a phrase we need to throw out, because everybody attaches a different thing to it without having a clear definition. But I did this interview with *Vice Magazine*, where that quote comes from, and they were asking me about it. Jerry Seinfeld apparently did this, you may already know this story, but Jerry Seinfeld recently performed for a college audience. He did this gay jester thing with his pinkie, where his punch line was about how this guy was like a gay prince, and he got some blowback for it. And then he said, “Well, audiences are too politically correct now. I can’t perform for a college audience.” And it became a big media story about how political correctness is ruining comedy, blah blah blah.

But the old Jerry Seinfeld, who was the workaholic standup comic, if he didn't get the desired reaction, would've gone home and rewritten that joke until it did. Jerry Seinfeld is a 60-year-old man now. I love Jerry Seinfeld, but he's 60. A college-age audience is 19. They don't want to listen to a guy who's 60. They want to listen to a guy like Bo Burnham who's 23 and speaks to that generation. And this might seem like an extreme analogy, but I don't think he's that far beyond Bob Hope in the 1960's, who had been the most popular comedian in America, and then alienated everybody under the age of 50 based on his point of view. So if you as a comedian or an artist don't evolve with the culture, and maybe a gay jester is just not acceptable in our culture, not because of political correctness, but just because of the evolution of society, if you refuse to go along with the evolution, then you're gonna make yourself increasingly irrelevant, and you're not an artist then if you stop creating. So I feel like the political correctness thing is kind of a non-controversy, really. But I said this to *Vice Magazine* when they asked me about that, and then this website called *The Interrobang* picked up on it, and they ran this headline, they called me a comedy writer, and the headline said, "Comedy Writer Tells Jerry Seinfeld to Shut Up." *(laughter)* I never said that!

AC: It's fair to say there's a comedy boom now.

KN: Yes, definitely a comedy boom now.

AC: By that very definition, it has to end. How do you think that will come about?

KN: I don't know, but of course it will. It's interesting to have written this book. I get to study the patterns. They're right there. There was a comedy boom in the fifties with the coffee house guys and the comedy records, and that petered out. Then in the 80's, there was the famous comedy club boom, and then that petered out. Now we have this new boom that includes podcasts, they're part of the boom, and it seems like every time there's a boom, everybody's anticipating the bust. But then it doesn't happen. I would've thought the podcast thing would've died a couple years ago, but there are more and more and more. So then, we have this false sense of thinking, "Oh, it's not gonna bust, it'll last forever." And then usually that's when it busts, when you assume it's gonna last forever.

You can't really anticipate when it's gonna bust, but you can anticipate that inevitably it will. It always does. There's always an oversaturation and then it peters out. And then there'll be another boom. Who knows when, but there'll be another one.

AC: You really show the parallels between the album boom in the 50's and what's happening online now. Comedians didn't want to be online, because why would you come and see (them)? It's the same argument they made with the albums. I think we probably have time for some questions, if they want to bring the lights up. I'll repeat them because we're recording this. Does anyone have a question they'd like to ask Kliph? (*to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: You mentioned how sometimes careers move on, and I notice you don't mention Rodney Dangerfield. He actually started his career, it ended, and then he restarted.

KN: I'm glad you mentioned him.

AC: I haven't yet.

KN: If you buy the book, *(laughter)* if you buy the book, he's a core piece of the book, Rodney Dangerfield. He really is. And that story that you're mentioning, for people who don't know, Rodney Dangerfield started doing standup in the late 40's under the name Jack Roy. Rodney Dangerfield came out with a cheap memoir where he talks about this, where he said "I wasn't making a living as a standup comic under the name Jack Roy, I was struggling, so I got out of standup and I started selling aluminum siding and doing construction. I made a great living. But I wasn't *living*. And so I went back into standup and I changed my name to Rodney Dangerfield, the end."

But when I researched my book, I discovered that, yes, he did standup under the name Jack Roy. Yes, he sold aluminum siding and did construction under the name Jack Roy. But the reason he made a good living is because he was what they called a "tin man." He was a scam artist. He would go to the homes of widows or mothers who had lost a child in the war, a soldier, and say, "Ma'am, as you can see, I am a veteran. I have the ruptured duck on my lapel, which symbolizes that. And thanks to the GI bill, I can get you a discount on home repair. I see that your shutters could be replaced. I could give you a great deal." And they would say, "OK," and then he would bilk them like ten times the worth of the repairs, and was making hundreds of thousands of dollars ripping people off. He had a fleet of trucks, and a fleet of employees. He would go to Hansen's Drug

Store in Manhattan and hire other comedians to come and help him with this scam, including this guy named Howard Storm who was a standup comic who became the director of *Mork and Mindy* years later.

So he ripped all these people off, and then in 1954, I guess the FBI had been monitoring Rodney Dangerfield as Jack Roy, and they burst into his house at 5:30 in the morning and arrested him for wide-scale fraud under the name Jack Roy. When he changed his name Rodney Dangerfield and returned to standup, it was because his business was no more. He was busted by the FBI, and now he had this stigma as Jack Roy, scam artist. So he changed his name to Rodney Dangerfield. And the name Rodney Dangerfield was stolen from an episode of *The Jack Benny Program*. It was a joke name they would use on the radio show. If there was a telephone operator, they'd say, "Who may I ask is calling, please? Rodney Dangerfield? Just hold on." That's where he stole the name from. So Rodney's a main part of the book. I discovered in my research, I found the newspaper article where he got busted by the FBI. Never mentioned in his book, by the way. *(laughter)*

AC: *(to audience)* Uh, yeah, in the back there.

Audience member: So how much of the book is also based on your online blogs? Is this like a starting point? Is there a lot more online?

KN: No, nothing that's online is in this book. It's all new. There's a few subjects I touch upon that I've written about online, including Rodney Dangerfield and Shecky Greene,

and of course I had this great reservoir of interviews I'd already done for online stuff that I could pull from. So the original quotes that are in the book, with Steve Martin, were from that phone call I was talking about, but I didn't initially use. So if you read my stuff online, this is not redundant. I was actually very intent on making sure that was the case, because one, I now had the opportunity and luxury to take as much time as I wanted, but also I didn't want to be just putting together a collection of stuff I'd already written. So it's all new.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* Another question? Yes sir.

Audience member: I don't know if you can speak to this, but I'm very curious: a lot of the developments of all these trends in standup seem to be very rooted in America. I don't know if the influence of those waves was felt far outside of North America…

KN: Well, the influence was felt for sure, but I think the trajectory would be completely different if you wrote a history of Canadian comedy. Somebody should write a book that's a history of Canadian comedy. *(laughter)* Or a history of U.K. comedy. It'd be a different story altogether. But obviously, the influence is there. I arbitrarily cut out anybody, for the most part, who wasn't American, because you can't include everybody, and it was a history of American comedy. But there is a big section in there on Lorne Michaels, and the section on Lorne Michaels, it was in *The Walrus*. They excerpted it this month. It's from 1965 to '74. I don't tell Lorne Michaels's story after '74 because we kind of already know it. I wanted to tell the story that hadn't been told before. And the

reason I included Lorne Michaels, despite him being Canadian, is that obviously he's had such a vast influence in American comedy. So many of the people that came in the 80's and 90's were prominent because he gave them a shot. So there's Lorne Michaels stuff in there, but I don't think it'd be the same book if it was about a different country.

AC: *(to audience)* Another question? *(to Kliph)* There are so many people that you want to go out and find material that you can watch, like The Committee, which I didn't really know about, to be honest. Fascinating sketch troupe, and very influential.

KN: Yes, very much so. The Committee was an anti-war sketch troupe in the late 60's. It was formed by some ex-pats from the Second City who wanted to do the same thing as the Second City, but be more political and subversive. So a lot of their stuff was about the Vietnam War. A lot of famous people came out of it, like Howard Hesseman, Carl Gottlieb, who wrote *The Jerk* for Steve Martin and also wrote the screenplay to *Jaws*, by the way. Same guy wrote *The Jerk* and *Jaws*. He was in The Committee. A lot of people who were later involved in *WKRP in Cincinnati* were involved in The Committee. This guy Peter Bonerz, who doesn't like it when I pronounce his name like that, by the way. *(laughter)* It's "Bahn-erz" with a "z," but come on. (*laughter)* He was in The Committee, and he was the dentist on *The Bob Newhart Show*, that's right. So all these guys came out of The Committee, and it's amazing when you look at the people who were in The Committee. They're all in every TV show in the next two decades. Alan Myerson, who directed all the *Police Academy* movies, he was in The Committee. Who else?

AC: Was Craig T. Nelson?

KN: No…

AC: No, that's a different…

KN: Craig T. Nelson, it's weird to think that he was ever funny. *(laughter)*

AC: I was surprised, I was surprised.

KN: He may have been the straight man in the troupe, I don't know. But they were in a thing called The Three Bananas. Craig T. Nelson was the first guy to ever perform at The Comedy Store the night that it opened. It was him, this guy Rudy De Luca, who was Mel Brooks's cowriter on *High Anxiety* and *Silent Movie* and a nice guy. And who was the other guy? Rudy De Luca…who did you just say?

AC: Uh, Craig T. Nelson…

KN: Oh, Barry Levinson, the director. Before any of them were famous, it was Barry Levinson, Craig T. Nelson and Rudy De Luca. They did this thing The Three Bananas. Rudy De Luca had been ghostwriting Sammy Shore's standup act for Las Vegas. Sammy Shore founded The Comedy Store, and was married to Mitzi Shore, who took over. They took over the building Ciro's, which was a famous nightclub in Los Angeles that had

fallen on hard times. They were driving past it, Rudy De Luca and Sammy Shore, and Sammy Shore said, “Jeez, I’d really like to take over that club and call it The Sammy Shore Room.” And Rudy De Luca said, “The Sammy Shore Room? Nobody’s gonna come to The Sammy Shore Room. Nobody knows who the fuck you are!” So they called it The Comedy Store.

But Barry Levinson and Rudy De Luca and Craig T. Nelson did this comedy team, and they just did abstract impressions, like they did Sears catalogue impressions, which later became almost a hack routine in the 80’s, where you look at your watch and look in this direction and freeze. But yeah, so Craig T. Nelson was not in The Committee, he was in this thing The Three Bananas on the west coast.

AC: Have you been getting reactions from some of the comedians you’ve interviewed? I know you mentioned Merrill Markoe, who is actually coming to Humber in a few weeks…

KN: Oh, really? She’s delightful.

AC: But have you heard from people who are maybe gonna be future interviews?

KN: Well, I’ve heard from lots of people. I’m just delighted that I was able to curry favor with so many of these people. Larry David did not consent to an interview, but he gave me a photo for the book. In the middle of the book there’s a photo that Larry David gave me of he and Richard Lewis in the Playboy Club, and they’re flanked by Playboy

bunnies. It's really funny. I got to go and hang out with Albert Brooks in his home, with his wife, because they have all this memorabilia from their father. I tell the story of Albert Brooks's father in the book. He was a comedian in the 30's and 40's who, in the 50's, was doing a roast of Lucille Ball, went up onstage, destroyed, brought down the house, went and sat down on the dais next to Milton Berle, and then dropped dead in front of a thousand people. Albert Brooks's dad.

So because of that, Albert was delighted that I was finally writing this story about his father, so I got to hang out at his house and go through all the scrapbooks and stuff, and we're still in contact. Mel Brooks, of course, I got to do a show with him in Los Angeles. He gave me a blurb for the back of the book. Steve Martin, who I'd lost contact with, actually, e-mailed me. He'd got a hold of the book, and he wrote me this delightful letter that said, "I think it's an important document, you should be very proud, where can I buy copies, I want to give one to Martin Short, David Letterman." And then he followed up a week later, and he asked me to research something for him. "In 1969 I was in Laurel Canyon, some comedian, I went to his house, they wanted me to write his act. I don't remember who he was, but he introduced me to this drunk man in the corner who smelled like pee, and it was Tennessee Williams." *(laughter)* "But I don't know who the comedian is. Can you help?" And I was like, "No, Steve, leave me alone." *(laughter)*

But no no no, I helped. I wrote him back, and using those clues, I was able to deduce who it was. I said, "Laurel Canyon, 1969, a comedian who wanted you to write him a Vegas act." So I asked an old man, this guy Howard Storm, actually, who I said directed *Mork and Mindy*. I asked, "Does that ring a bell? Do you know any comedians…" He knew immediately. He goes, "There's only two comedians lived in

Laurel Canyon who worked Vegas. There's Jackie Kahane and Sammy Shore." So Jackie Kahane's dead, so I phoned Sammy Shore, who I'd interviewed for the book, and I go, "Hey Sammy, I have this weird question for you that Steve Martin wants me to ask. He says that he went to somebody's house in '69, blah blah blah, Tennessee Williams? Does that ring a bell?" And Sammy goes, "Yeah yeah yeah, Tennessee." *(laughter)* I go, "You knew Tennessee Williams?" Sammy Shore, this shticky comedian. He goes, "Yeah, you know, you just know people." *(laughter)* So I wrote Steve Martin back, and he goes, "Yeah, that sounds like it. It was Sammy Shore." So I solved the mystery for Steve Martin.

But it's so cool. And Richard Lewis is on the cover of the book, and when you buy the book after the show, you'll see that the cover is a *Sgt. Pepper* parody, and Richard Lewis was delighted he was on the cover, and he showed it to a friend of his. He said, "Check the cover of this book out…Ringo!" He showed it to Ringo Starr. *(laughter)* So I'm delighted, yeah. This book could sell zero copies, except for tonight, you sons of bitches, and I would be a happy man, just because of that flattery I'm getting. It's great, because like I said earlier, if I'd been doing standup all these years, I don't think I'd have this attention from these comedy gods, and then somehow, through the back door, I now have access to all of them. It's surreal. I love it.

AC: There's a lot of comedians like Shecky Greene that there isn't much footage of, and you talk about Shecky, but of the comedians that you went through in the book, is there anyone that we should look for, like go home and Google to see perform?

KN: The beauty of this book coming out now is that you can go online and find a lot of this stuff. So when you read the story that I have in there about Albert Brooks's dad dying onstage in his last performance, you can Google it and you'll find my website where I have the audio, which I got from Albert, of his dad's final performance. So there's not too many people in the book that you won't be able to find some footage of online. It may not be indicative of what I'm talking about. The Shecky Greene footage does not convey what he was like in a nightclub. To the contrary, it almost contradicts what I say in the book about him being a great, inventive comedian. You just see him doing these kind of bland, Dean Martin shots. He was a guy who was a creature of the nightclub. A lot of people are like that.

I think Richard Lewis is like that. There are a lot of guys you need to see live to really get what they're doing, and when you see them on TV boiled down and constrained by five minutes, it doesn't really work the same way. Jonathan Winters was like that. Jonathan Winters, despite having all these great best-selling comedy records, it's not the same Jonathan Winters that performed in a nightclub. His best footage is on the Jack Paar show, where they just let him do whatever he wants, but when he had to host something, or do a variety show sketch, or do a movie, it just wasn't the same for him.

AC: You quote Lorne Michaels saying that doing a pilot, or otherwise doing TV, brings out every conservative impulse you have.

KN: That's right, you get reined in.

AC: They rein in everything that's good about them. *(to audience)* Any more questions? Yeah, right there, sir.

Audience member: Two questions. One, what's the funniest movie you've ever seen? And second, what do you think about David Letterman?

AC: What's the funniest movie, and what about David Letterman, who you definitely talk about?

KN: My favorite comedy movie is *Playtime* by Jacques Tati, which I saw across the street when I used to work at the Paradise Cinema when I was a boy. *(applause)* It's a very polarizing movie, by the way. It's French, so it's polarizing already, but I've never gone to a comedy where I've seen it in a theater three times, and half the audience walks out every single time, and then the other half are just killing themselves laughing. It's a good movie.

David Letterman's one of the most influential standup comics of the last 35 years. In the 80's, during the comedy boom, there were so many derivative Lettermans onstage with that sarcastic style. The only guy who became big that is clearly, to me, derivative of David Letterman is Norm MacDonald, who has a very unique voice, but just in little small cadences. There are only two comedians who go, "Good lord!" And that's Letterman and Norm MacDonald. It comes right from Letterman. Not that that means anything, but you know what I mean. He had pressing influence. And for guys who were

a little bit newer who came up in the 80's, it was not Johnny Carson who was the most important guy. You hear the stories about how every comedian wanted to get on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* because it could make you a star, and that's true, but for the next wave of guys who came up in the late 80's, *Letterman* was the show you wanted to get on, because that was the hip cachet. That was credibility with the hip contingent. So guys like Bill Hicks, Norm MacDonald, Adam Sandler, to them Letterman was the beacon. He was very, very influential.

Merrill Markoe told me something recently that I thought was fascinating. I did not know this. I think most people who know Merrill Markoe know that she created a lot of the template for *Late Night* with David Letterman. They were writing partners. She was a Comedy Store standup, and he was a Comedy Store standup. But I did not know this, that when Letterman was doing standup on *Johnny Carson,* the first two times, before he became a permanent guest host for a little while, he was doing Merrill Markoe's act, which she gave him. She wasn't even writing the jokes, it was her act, which was superior to Letterman's. So he went on *Carson*, he memorized Merrill's act and just changed the gender. I found that fascinating. I posted a link to a Youtube video of Letterman's standup act, and I was like, "This is still great, these jokes." "Not a speck of cereal," that's a famous joke. And she went, "Yeah, those are my jokes. I was a dumb young girl, and I just gave them to him."

AC: Wow. I think there was one more question. *(to audience)* Yes, sir.

Audience member: When you did Marc Maron's show, just before you showed up there, you got a very angry call from Jack Carter. Did he ever forgive you?

KN: Yeah, he did, actually. That's funny. (*pause)* I have to do a guzzle of water before I do my Jack Carter voice. Jack Carter died in June at the age of 93. The obit said he was 92, but he was 93. Jack Carter was my favorite guy. He's all over this book. When I used to watch TV reruns, he would always pop up all the time. Variety shows, game shows, sitcoms, *Mannix, Rockford Files*, everything, Jack Carter, Jack Carter. And I never understood why, because he wasn't that good. Nobody really liked him. And he had the record for the most standup shots on *Ed Sullivan*. It became a running joke in my own mind when I would watch TV Land. "Oh, I wonder if Jack Carter's gonna be on this episode." And then he would be, just randomly. *(laughter)*

So I kinda wanted to interview him, because I had this sort of morbid fascination with this sort of mediocre guy. And he was a very ingratiating standup. I'll get to your question in a second. *(laughter)* He was a very ingratiating guy onstage, big smile, he loves to entertain, Mr. Show Business, he'd close with a song. And he wasn't that great. He was all right, but he was nobody's favorite. But then when I interviewed him, (I asked) "What do you think about Shecky Greene?" "Ah, fuck Shecky!" "Why?" "Ah, he's a fuckin' asshole!" *(laughter)* "I thought you guys were best friends!" "Yeah, we used to be. He's a big thief! He stole my best bit about dumplings! That scumbag! May he rot in hell!" And I was like, "Oh my God, this is the best copy a writer could ever ask for." *(laughter)* But he made me laugh so hard when he was ranting and raving. It was the antithesis of his stage persona.

So he used to play Vancouver all the time in the 50's and 60's. He used to play this place called the Cave Nightclub, and he was a favorite in Vancouver back in those days. So he liked me just because I was from Vancouver. He invited me to come visit him the next time I was in Los Angeles, before I lived there. So I bike up to his house in Beverly Hills. He lives across from Sidney Poitier. I never realized the correlation between these things. I wonder if this is why, but he lives across from Sidney Poitier, and his house, this huge house, had a blackface lawn jockey right on the doorstep. *(laughter, gasps)* This is in 2012. *(laughter)* And I go into the house, and the housekeeper answers the door, Spanish housekeeper, and I said, "I'm here to see Jack," and she goes, "Oh yeah," and I hear, "Senor, senor!" And she goes into the other room, and I step in, and to my left there's an atrium of plants, and in the middle, there's a sculptor's bust of Jack Carter in the house. *(laughter)* And he looks up at me with this walker, he comes up and he goes, "You Kliph?" I go, "Yep." He goes, "Urggh," and he turns around and walks into the house, and I'm like, "I guess that means 'Come in,' I don't know."

I go into his den, and there's an oil painting of him from the 70's with a big butterfly collar, and on the other wall there's another oil painting of him from the Friar's Club in a tuxedo. It was like Norma Desmond, like *Sunset Boulevard.* I did an interview with him, and he goes, "I didn't think you'd be so young!" He was like, "You're on your bicycle?" *(laughter)* "Why'd you come here just in a T-shirt? Why don't you dress properly?" He got all mad. *(laughter)* We're hanging out, and we're doing these interviews, and I'm asking him about Bill Miller's Riviera in '46, and he goes, "You know every fuckin' thing! How do you know every fuckin' thing?" *(laughter)* And I'd ask him about this gig, he goes, "Yeah, I did a gig in Baltimore at the…at the…what is it

called…what is it called…Ehhh…Doesn't matter." And then he'd go on with the story. And then he'd be talking about something. "Yeah, Johnny Carson…The Walton Roof! It was called THE WALTON ROOF!!" *(laughter)*

This one time I went over to his house, and he would always feed me in the afternoon. So we're sitting in the kitchen, and he's got the lox and the bagels and the cream cheese, and I'm putting cream cheese on the bagel, and Jack had a big hunchback, and he's sitting at the table, and he's like panting, he's looking intensely at my bagel, and he's like *(breathing very deeply)*, and I was like, "Jack, what's wrong?" He goes, "SCHMEAR PROPER! WHAT THE FUCK KIND OF A GOY SCHMEAR IS THAT? PUT IT ON THICK! GIVE ME THE BAGEL!" *(laughter)* He grabbed the bagel from my hand and stabbed the knife into the cream cheese, and he says, "Schmear properly!" And he gave it back. *(laughter)* This is who Jack Carter was in real life. It was the most entertaining thing in the world. I couldn't get enough. I couldn't get enough.

But the thing was, he was so prolific. He started standup in 1942. Morey Amsterdam gave him his big break. His last credit, as a regular role, was on *Shameless* on Showtime with William H. Macy. He did several episodes of *New Girl*. His credits, when he died, were all 2015 credits. He started in 1942, and he finished in 2015. I had so much respect for that, because he was not that talented. He was competent. He was hilarious offstage, mediocre onstage, but the man worked like crazy. He really worked hard. Plus, he also burned every bridge in the business. *(laughter)* And yet he still remained this prolific. If he hadn't burned every bridge, I don't even know. He wouldn't have had enough time in the day to do all that he did. But I loved Jack Carter.

So anyways, to get to your question, I was going to do Marc Maron's podcast for the first time. I'm on it again next week, by the way, to promote the book. I was going to Maron's house. A friend of mine was driving me there. Five minutes before we get there, my cell phone rings, and I thought it was Maron's assistant making sure I was coming. I answer the phone, and it's Jack Carter. "Kliph! I got a bone to pick with you!" *(laughter)* "What? What's wrong, Jack?" "I was at a party last night. Somebody's laptop came out. And there was every fuckin' word I ever said to you! *(laughter)* On the internet!" And I said, "Yeah, Jack, that's how we met, remember? That's what the interview the first time was for." And he goes, "I don't know who you're sellin' this shit to, you're makin' money offa me!" I said, "No, Jack, that's my website." "It's your website?" "Yeah." "Then how did it get on my wife's computer?!" *(laughter)*

So I'm driving to Maron's house, and he's just ranting and raving, and Jack ends the conversation, he goes, "You and me are through forever!" *(laughter)* Hangs up. And so now I'm kind of scared of him. So a couple months go by, and some guy had e-mailed me, some guy in Boston e-mailed me. He went through the Friar's Club, and he was trying to book Jack Carter for some Orthodox event. And they said, "No no, you don't want Jack Carter," the Friar's Club said to this guy. But this guy had read my interviews with him online, and so he asked me for a second opinion. And I said, "Actually, Jack, if he's booked for a gig, he knows how to gear his material for the audience. An Orthodox crowd is an impossible crowd to play, but Jack Carter could do it, so yeah, go ahead." So he did. He booked him and flew him to Boston.

Then I get a phone call like four months later. Jack says, "Kliph! Haven't heard from you in a while." *(laughter)* I go, "Yeah, you said we were through forever."

(laughter) He goes, “Ehhh.” *(laughter)* “This guy in Boston said that you recommended me for a gig.” I said, “Yeah.” “Well, you uh, should come over for lunch.” *(laughter)* So we made up, yeah, and then he died in June. But yeah, he was a good guy, I loved him.

AC: So he had a career that spanned all those decades, so my final question to you would be basically, having studied comedy for that long a period, do you think comedy is essentially the same, and then it just takes on different forms, or do you think it really changes with each generation moving forward?

KN: I think it does change with each generation. I think it is strictly generational. It’s so weird to think that the biggest comedians of the 30’s, the 40’s, guys like Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, are not only not that famous anymore, after being so famous, but that the majority of society doesn’t think they’re funny at all. Which is weird, because they must have been funny if they were that popular doing that for a living. But it’s because they spoke to their generation. Comedy has an expiry date. It’s not specific, but it makes itself irrelevant when it’s no longer speaking to the generation.

I went and saw Robert Klein last time he was in Los Angeles. Robert is a very sweet guy. But the people that were in the audience were people that were Robert Klein’s age, 70 years old. There were some young comics in the back, and they had heard stories that Robert Klein was very influential, that he was Jerry Seinfeld’s favorite comedian, Jay Leno’s favorite comedian, Bill Maher’s favorite comedian, but the thing is, he was almost too influential, because now his comedy doesn’t seem particularly biting. He’s doing airline jokes. And so these young comedians are like, “Ugh, he’s a hack, he’s doing

airline jokes." They don't realize he *invented* airline jokes. But as you get older, you continue to speak about your experience. So the people in the audience are gonna relate if they're that age. So if he's talking about losing his hearing, the kids in their 20's aren't gonna know a thing. And likewise, if he's complaining about cell phones, they're not gonna think he's funny. And likewise, you hear a lot of old comedians complain about cussing from young comedians.

But again, it's generational. It's not because the guy's not funny, it's because when that comedian was raised in that era or that old person was raised in that era, you didn't do that. So you always speak to your generation as a comedian, and sadly, there are a few exceptions, but sadly, most comedians, the older they get, there's a huge swath of the population that finds them less and less funny, because there's a new crop coming up. And it speaks to that Jerry Seinfeld divide about the people being too PC. I think it's a generational thing. So the only thing I forecast, and I think this is true, there are exceptions like Mel Brooks, who gets old and remains hilarious to most people, but that is very rare. I think whoever is the coolest, hippest young comedian today, who is popular, fifty or sixty years from now, there's gonna be a whole new generation saying, "That person's not funny. They're a square." And that's the weird thing about comedy. Really, to me that's the tragic thing, that no comedian is considered funny forever.

AC: Great. Well, your book is fantastic. I hope everybody buys it.

KN: Me too.

AC: It’s a tremendous read. It’s been great talking to you.

KN: Thanks, Andrew. Thanks, everybody! *(applause)* Come buy a book!