

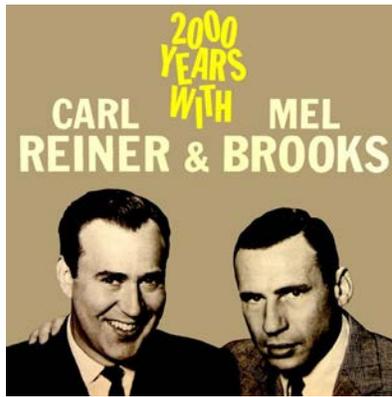
# “2000 Years with Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks”—Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks (1961)

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Essay by Robert Alan Crick (guest post)\*



*Carl Reiner*



*Original album*



*Mel Brooks*

The release of the 1961 LP “2000 Years with Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks”—the first of several uproariously oddball “2000 Year Old Man” albums that the much-loved funnymen Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks would unleash over the next several decades—preserved for all time one of 20th century America’s most endearing, and enduring, comedy teams.

By the time the album first arrived, Reiner and Brooks, ultimately best pals for another half-century and then some, were already fast friends. First brought together in 1950 for Sid Caesar’s legendary comedy-variety program “Your Show of Shows”—for which Reiner became both a sketch writer and a pivotal on-air performer, and for which, in its “Admiral Broadway Revue” days in 1949, Brooks had already been a valued joke contributor—the two men found each other rib-ticklingly funny right from the start.

Behind the scenes at “Your Show of Shows” (and, later, “Caesar’s Hour”), Reiner, Brooks, and a dazzling assemblage of up-and-comers from Larry Gelbart to Neil Simon would “bust a gut”—and split many a side—furiously brainstorming the nuttiest possible gags for Caesar, Reiner, Imogene Coca, Howard Morris, and other stars to perform each week. The deadlines were relentless, and the pressure exhausting, but it was here, in the writers’ room, that Reiner and Brooks first made it their mission to make each other laugh.

Reiner recalled later that when he first met Brooks, he found him delivering, apropos of nothing, a madcap roleplaying bit about an inflation-bedeveled Jewish pirate. Having found the perfect playmate, the similarly quick-witted Reiner—patterning his delivery on noted broadcaster Dan Seymour—soon began initiating the lunacy himself, and Brooks, relishing the challenge, was only too happy to join in. One such gag-starter, or variations on it, proved virtually surefire. “Sir,” Reiner’s interviewer would query, “is it true that you are 2000 years old?”—to which Brooks, in full “elderly Jewish man” mode, would spout preposterous “firsthand” insight into the lives and times of everyone from Moses to Jesus to Paul Revere. The resulting “vocal ping pong,” as

Brooks once called it, was both historical *and* hysterical, and just like that, “The 2000 Year Old Man”—the comedy premise; not the modern-day Methuselah himself, obviously—was born.

Such anything-for-a-laugh improvisational brilliance proved far too irresistible to stay confined to the “Caesar’s Hour” writers’ room, and soon Reiner and Brooks were entertaining eager listeners outside the office as well as in. Amateur recordings (created strictly for their pleasure in those days, not for profit) made the rounds at parties; showbiz titans from Billy Rose to Lerner and Lowe enjoyed unofficial “command performances”; and George Burns jokingly warned that he would steal the act for himself if Reiner and Brooks didn’t cut an album soon.

Finally, in 1960, former “Tonight Show” host Steve Allen secured a recording studio, at long last putting “2000 Years with Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks” on vinyl for everyone to enjoy. Other “2000 Year Old Man” albums followed (their fifth would win a Grammy in 1997), and a business-suited Reiner and a caped, hatted, cane-toting Brooks performed the bit on TV’s “The New Steve Allen Show,” “The Hollywood Palace,” “The Colgate Comedy Hour,” “The Ed Sullivan Show,” “The Andy Williams Show,” and other venues. An animated Reiner and Brooks (the former drawn with turtleneck and raincoat, the latter with spectacles, sandals, and white beard) even headlined a half-hour television special, and the Old Man’s comedic impact reverberated far and wide. Surely traces wafted their way into George Burns’ twinkly-eyed, seen-it-all, done-it-all Almighty when director Reiner and writer Larry Gelbert adapted novelist Avery Corman’s “Oh, God!” for the big screen, and director Brooks channeled the Old Man’s off-kilter perspective on ancient yesterdays and yester-people in several films, especially “History of the World, Part I.”

Surprisingly, the original, Grammy-nominated “2000 Years with Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks” LP contains only about 12-and-a-half minutes in which “reporter” Reiner actually questions “senior citizen” Brooks. The remaining, less celebrated tracks likewise merit attention, however, as they too provide intriguing glimpses into the workings of two of the brightest young comic minds of the early 1960s—and a pretty good look at *our* mindset during that era as well.

The title of track two, the showbiz satire “Fabiola,” naturally brings to mind teen heartthrob Fabian, whose singing career had begun three years before. Running barely two minutes, “Fabiola” wraps before it really gets going, but for television fans it surely recalled Sid Caesar’s turns as ultra-cool jazzman Progress Hornsby, interviewed by Reiner as Aristotle Cookie, highbrow host of TV’s “Ominous” (the Caesar team’s spoof of Alistair Cooke and “Omnibus”), or as seated, cigarette-puffing “People to People” anchor Ted Burrows (i.e., Edward R. Murrow and “Person to Person”). It’s difficult too not to see Brooks’ character as a pre-“The Producers” version of L.S.D., Dick Shawn’s blissed-out hippie from Brooks’ movie-directing debut, making “Fabiola” somehow echo Reiner’s small-screen past and foreshadow Brooks’ big-screen future in one bolt.

Like so much 1960s comedy—which saw everyone from The Three Stooges to Don Knotts to Bill Dana hitting the launch pad for laughs—track three, “The Astronaut,” reflects the era’s obsession with the still-burgeoning Space Age. It wasn’t the first time Reiner and Brooks had looked skyward for material, perhaps most notably in Reiner’s interview with Sid Caesar’s nonsensical space “expert” Professor Ludwig von Spacebrain on “Your Show of Shows.”

Track four, “In a Coffee House,” sees Reiner mingling with patrons of the titular establishment and engaging four delightful eccentrics. Although “The Depressed One” gives Brooks the big punchline, it also rewards Reiner with one of his wittiest moments, and “The Actor” lampoons Method actors much as Sid Caesar once spoofed Marlon Brando in a famous sendup of “A Streetcar Named Desire” from 1952. “The Painter” confirms that, like Caesar, Brooks had quite a knack for flavorful accents, here sounding so much like exuberant character actor Vito Scotti that it’s hard to believe Reiner’s “Dick Van Dyke Show” script featuring Scotti as a hyper-enthusiastic émigré housepainter came later, not before. “The Folksinger,” acknowledging yet another inescapable ‘60s trend, likewise showcases some amusing vocal work, suggesting Brooks’ smarmy “Blazing Saddles” Governor turned piano-pounding showbiz hack.

Colorful accents also fuel track five, “The Peruvian,” featuring one of those shouting, sputtery German caricatures Sid Caesar always had such fun with, but its chief driving force is Jewish World War II vet Brooks’ undying bitterness about Hitler and his Nazis. Suffice it to say that it’s only a few short goosesteps from Brooks’ identity-denying title character to Kenneth Mars’ Fuhrer-idolizing, hiding-in-plain-sight “Springtime for Hitler” playwright in “The Producers.”

Given that even a “Peanuts” character had started peddling mental health advice the previous year, perhaps the subject chosen for the duo’s final track, “The Psychiatrist,” was downright inevitable. Comedians from Shelley Berman to Jonathan Winters were working therapy bits into their material (several of them—including Brooks—found analysis beneficial in real-life as well), and Sid Caesar had performed a psychiatry sketch as early as 1949 on “Admiral Broadway Revue.” Here Caesar protégés Reiner and Brooks likewise give it a go (the latter would portray another, slightly less scatterbrained analyst in his 1977 “psycho-comedy” “High Anxiety”), and as “free association” techniques go, listeners may find their style of verbal improvisation a far better spirit-lifter than the type championed by Dr. Freud.

For all its acclaim, Reiner and Brooks maintained that their material was actually at its best away from the recording studio, where too much preparation risked dissipating some of its natural magic. That’s possible, but we’re grateful they shared their talents with us, and that both the original LP and its follow-ups survive for us to enjoy again and again. Like the Old Man himself, “2000 Years with Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks” lives on.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

