

“A Wild and Crazy Guy”--Steve Martin (1978)

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Essay by Kliph Nesteroff (guest post)*



Steve Martin

It was only audio, but it conjured up images of a man in an all-white suit. It was just a record, something you could only hear, still you vividly pictured his awkward movements as he got “happy feet.” Never had a comedy record been so visual. “I gave my cat a bath the other day,” said the maniac with an arrow through his head. “I’d always heard that you weren’t supposed to give cats baths. But my cat came home and he was really dirty, and I decided to give him a bath --and it was great. If you have a cat, don’t worry about it, they love it. He sat there and he enjoyed it... The fur would stick to my tongue, but other than that....”

“A Wild and Crazy Guy” was the second comedy album from Steve Martin. Rising unexpectedly to number two on the “Billboard” charts, it defined a new era of comedy.

Comedy’s outrageous rebels reaped the benefit when obscenity laws were overturned as unconstitutional in the early 1970s. Within a few short years, the rebel comedians were fully assimilated into the mainstream. The profane honesty of Richard Pryor, the satirical indictments of SCTV, the madcap surrealism of Monty Python, the cocaine-fueled danger of “Saturday Night Live”--they collectively created a new language in comedy. But it was “A Wild and Crazy Guy,” a Steve Martin album without drug references or political commentary, that defined comedy in the post-Watergate era.

He used his real name on stage, but Steve Martin was always in character. It seems politically prophetic today, but the persona of a smug, incompetent, obnoxious narcissist was considered apolitical at the time. Absurd and surreal on the surface, Martin said his stand-up act was driven by a calculated theme: “It’s about the way people are in the ten feet that surround them. It’s about individuals and how distorted their thoughts can get just being alive in the world, and how you have to become crazy in order to survive...”ⁱ

“A Wild and Crazy Guy” chronicles the most popular comedian in America at the exact moment he became a superstar. It is a living document, a snapshot of comedy history, an audio documentary of a career in transition.

Just four years earlier, Steve Martin was despondent, his career trapped in purgatory. Writing comedy for television variety programs like “The Ken Berry Wow Show” and “The Ray Stevens Show” was unrewarding. He watched contemporaries like George Carlin, Cheech and Chong, and Albert Brooks forge new ground, while he was stuck contributing hokum to the shows his friends were more likely to ridicule than embrace.

At 29 years of age, Martin was deep in debt and scraping by as he did stand-up at venues like Bubba’s Fine Food in Coconut Grove, Florida. He struggled as he toured Hugh Hefner’s circuit of Playboy Clubs--once a symbol of Rat Pack chic, now considered square and passé. Those crowds preferred the linear humor of Jack Carter or Morey Amsterdam. Showbiz that satirized showbiz, comedy that made fun of comedy, was new and disorienting. The trade paper “Variety,” in its very first review of Martin, called him a “forced and unnatural” comedian who had “a lot to learn in spinning humor.” To rub it in, they put the phrase “comedian” in quotes. Martin wasn’t sure he had the strength to endure the lifestyle. “The beginning of ‘75, I was really down and out,” he recalled. “I was broke, depressed. I literally owed \$17,000. And I was supposed to work the Playboy Club ... they were gonna pay me \$1500 a week.” Booked for two weeks with an option for more if the act went over well, he was fired after just one show for lack of laughs. Devastated, he returned to his dressing room to pack his things--only to discover that someone had stolen his all-white suit.ⁱⁱ

“Martin was ready to quit show business,” reported “Rolling Stone.” “Everything seemed to be falling apart.” Had it not been for a degree in philosophy, he may have succumbed to the frustration. Instead he stepped outside of himself and observed with existential detachment, “Life exists so the universe can experience itself.”ⁱⁱⁱ Before the year was over, the universe would go through a hell of an experience.

Steve Martin’s life changed when a man named Bill McEuen took over his career. His brother John McEuen fronted The Nitty Gritty Dirty Band, a country rock group that fused hillbilly folk with a counterculture influence. Martin opened for them at the Ice House in Pasadena and The Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard where music aficionados formed an appreciative audience. McEuen felt the only reason Martin struggled was because he had been playing to the wrong people. While John McEuen sat backstage giving Martin banjo lessons, Bill McEuen designed a plan. Utilizing his industry connections, he booked Martin in the country’s top music venues. It was at the Boarding House in San Francisco, a club known for acts like Patti Smith and Tom Waits, where Martin came into his own. And it was there that McEuen laid the groundwork for a recording called “A Wild and Crazy Guy.”

In the right choice of venue, Martin’s cocky swagger and inept balloon animals went over big. With big laughs came new confidence. Things started to click. Show after show received a triumphant response. He wasn’t just experiencing comedy. This was evolution. Martin reached the next level as America finally caught up with him.

McEuen recorded every show, but he sat on the material until he could secure a record label that “got it.” He said, “There’s no point in releasing an album unless the label is truly committed to Steve Martin.”^{iv}

As a headliner, Martin received better pay, better venues, and greater freedom. “What I like about finally becoming headliner is that I can pull out all stops in being outrageous,” said Martin. “After a good set I like to help the club owners turn the room by inviting the audience out into the street with me for some more routines.” Martin would deliver comedy on the sidewalk as the crowd spilled into the streets. On cue, comedian Bob Einstein would pull up on a motorcycle dressed as “Officer Judy,” his policeman character from “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour.” In front of cheering onlookers, Einstein would arrest Martin for “Inciting a Comedy Riot.”

Making waves in the nightclub world, Martin came to the attention of the new sketch comedy series “Saturday Night Live.” With the help of staff writers James Downey and Marilyn Miller, he took his overconfident stand-up character and turned him into an Eastern-European swinger. He and Dan Aykroyd got huge laughs playing a couple of “wild and crazy guys” with delusions of grandeur. Seen by an audience of millions, the sketch sent Martin into the echelon of what he called “catchphrase heaven.”

In the late 1970s, rock musicians embraced flamboyance. The new genres of punk, disco, and glam rock attracted rabid maniacs. Stadium acts like Gene Simmons, Frank Zappa, and Alice Cooper incited the crowd with onstage spectacle. Rock acts cross-promoted with stickers, buttons, and t-shirts. Massive rock concerts filled sports stadiums while police issued hundreds of arrests for public intoxication and drug possession. Steve Martin became comedy’s representative in the scene.

Each time he appeared on “Saturday Night Live,” Martin saw his live ticket sales double, triple, quadruple. He could scarcely believe it when ticket sales for a gig in St. Louis reached 22,000. Steve Allen, the original host of “The Tonight Show,” watched in awe as Martin broke through from small clubs to massive stadiums. “For the first time in the history of comedy, the crowd was reacting like a rock music audience,” said Allen. “[It was] as if he were the Beatles or the Rolling Stones.”

It is this evolution--this explosion--that is captured so vividly on the comedy album “A Wild and Crazy Guy.” The album is important--not merely for the strength of its comedy--but for what it represents.

Half the record was recorded before an appreciative nightclub audience of 300 people. The second half gives way to an outdoor amphitheater where Martin performs for 10,000 screaming sycophants.

For 90 seconds “A Wild and Crazy Guy” lets the ambience speak for itself as thousands of fans roar without pause. It sounds like the Super Bowl, the World Series, or the Stanley Cup Finals. Record stores and shopping malls erected life-sized cardboard cut-outs of Steve Martin smiling in a white suit, his hands holding a tray upon which copies of “A Wild and Crazy Guy” rested.

The album rose to the top of the pop charts, sitting at number two for several weeks, unable to overthrow the “Saturday Night Fever” soundtrack in the top position. His sales were unprecedented for stand-up comedy. “A Wild and a Crazy Guy” sold 900,000 units in pre-sales alone.

Through his Warner Brothers trilogy--“Let’s Get Small” in 1977, “A Wild and Crazy Guy” in 1978, and “Comedy Is Not Pretty” in 1979--the ascent of America’s top stand-up is laid out. Three years in a row--bam, bam, bam--he won the Grammy Award for Comedy Album of the Year. In just 24 months, Martin went from being broke and despondent to a one-man comedy dynasty.

But beneath the adulation was a sense of frustration. His fan base consisted of thousands of young people acting wild and crazy themselves. The cocaine and alcohol consumed in parking lot tailgate parties prior to the shows were conducive to AC/DC concerts, but spelled disaster for the delicate art of stand-up. Martin became almost too successful. Unable to deliver his material without someone in the audience shouting his name, screaming out punchlines, or demanding he perform requested routines on cue, stand-up became untenable. “And they made this noise,” observed Steve Allen. “This silly coyote yelp that has nothing to do with humor.” Martin’s obnoxious character made him famous--but it made his audience even more obnoxious than he.

Fans knew his albums by heart and while they relished the opportunity to sing along to his novelty tune “King Tut,” they also expected new material each time they saw him. Martin found it impossible to test new material while his audience was screaming. He took it as a sign that it was time to move on.

“Writing it myself, breaking it all in--I can’t do it,” said Martin. “It’s just really hard to change material... but the movies are the thing.... If I can break into film--that’s what I’ve always been going for--since the age of three.”

The millions of people who purchased “A Wild and Crazy Guy” had no idea that their favorite comic was about to retire from stand-up. As he left the stadium scene to enter the movies fulltime, “A Wild and Crazy Guy” became an important time capsule, a snapshot in time that perfectly conveyed the sound, the feeling, and the vibe of what it was like to be the most popular comedian in America.

The comedian as rock star. The audience roaring. The sheer mania that swept the country in a massive, collective experience. Comedy had never seen or heard anything like it--and it is unlikely to experience such a phenomenon ever again. But there will always be this perfectly executed recording, which can immediately transport us back to 1978 to vividly re-experience that wild and crazy time.

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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.

ⁱ Orange Coast Magazine, Apr 1979

ⁱⁱ Rolling Stone, December 1, 1977

ⁱⁱⁱ Always Look on the Bright Side of Life by Eric Idle, pg 12

^{iv} Billboard, September 13, 1975