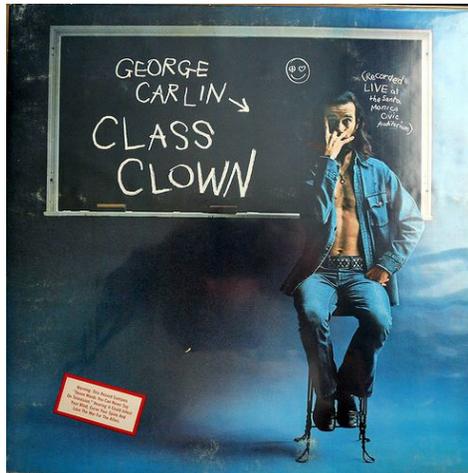


“Class Clown” -- George Carlin (1972)

Added to the National Registry: 2015

Essay by James Sullivan (guest post)*



Album Cover

Perhaps no other single comedy routine in American history has had the enduring cultural impact of George Carlin’s “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.” Released on his 1972 album “Class Clown,” which was added to the National Registry in 2015, the seven-minute routine established Carlin, once a benign young wit eager for mainstream approval, as a comic rebel, a philosopher with a microphone who questioned all of his era’s conventional wisdom.

Born on May 12, 1937, Carlin was raised in New York City by a single mother, who impressed upon her younger son the importance of consulting a good dictionary. Too restless and combative for the institutional expectations of school, Carlin dropped out as soon as he was legally able, soon enlisting in the Air Force. While stationed in Louisiana he began working as a disc jockey on a local rock ‘n’ roll station, an experience that would help confirm his belief that he might make his living by using his voice.

After an early discharge from the military, Carlin bounced from a radio station in Boston to another in Texas, meeting a fellow wiseguy name Jack Burns along the way. Together they moved to Los Angeles, where they took radio work as on-air personalities and honed a two-man comedy act that eventually got them a spot on “The Tonight Show” with Jack Paar. But Carlin wanted a solo career in comedy, and the two soon amicably split.

As the 1960s unfolded, Carlin established himself as a reliably telegenic performer, becoming a regular guest on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” picking up gigs as a cast member on a few short-lived variety shows, and angling for work as a comic actor in sitcoms and movies. But by the end of the decade, with young America growing increasingly conflicted about race relations, the war in Vietnam and other social and political issues, the comedian began searching for a new direction. In his 30s at the time, as he would later note, he was performing for the people a decade or so older than he was--the middle-class homeowners who made up the core audience for prime-time network television and took their vacations in casino towns. But he was beginning to understand that he would prefer to address his comedy to the generation a decade or so younger than himself.

At a time when some of the country’s top comedians--Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, Jonathan Winters--were major recording artists, Carlin’s own career on record did not really get off the ground until after his conversion to “hippie” comedy. He had an early release with Burns and a Grammy-nominated solo album, which he later repudiated, in 1967. But it was his 1972 album

“FM & AM” on which he first documented his makeover from the clean-cut Playboy Club regular he’d once been to the comedy world’s voice of the counterculture. The album included a bit of doggerel about his own lengthening hairstyle (“The Hair Piece”) and routines on recreational drug use and birth control. Tellingly, the lead track explored the euphemistic interjection “Shoot,” and its near-match expletive.

“FM & AM,” recorded over two nights at the Cellar Door nightclub in Washington, D.C. in June, 1971, won the Grammy Award for Best Comedy Recording of 1972. But it was the follow-up, “Class Clown,” recorded in May of that year at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium and released in September, that made Carlin a superstar to a generation.

As the title suggests, the album featured a long opening monologue about the fundamental comedians’ origin story of schoolroom disruption. A very relaxed Carlin joked about the various sounds he’d perfected to get his classmates to laugh, from “Hawaiian nose-humming” to the bodily-function sounds known as the Bronx cheer, the raspberry, and the “bi-labial fricative.” “I was so glad when I found out that had a real, official name to it,” he said.

Much of the album kept up the theme of Carlin’s own Catholic school misadventures. But “Class Clown” would become a comedy benchmark largely due to the performer’s growing resistance to middle American ideals. He opened one bit about the absurdity of salesmanship and consumer goods by talking about the “revolution” and its reconsideration of American values: “what you’ll do for ten dollars, what you’ll do *with* ten dollars. Really, it all comes down to values--what you value, and how much.” He used Muhammad Ali’s conscientious objector status as an entry point to a brief, barbed set of jokes about the Vietnam War.

Most famously, Carlin ended the album with the routine that would earn him his perch as one of the best and most admired stand-up comedians of all-time: the piece about profanity, and our hypocritical reactions to it, that would become known unofficially as the “Seven Dirty Words.”

“There are 400,000 words in the English language, and there are seven of them you can’t say on television,” he noted. “What a ratio that is!” Carlin took it upon himself to identify the offending expressions, making a memorable singsong of the short list of curse words that would “infect your soul, curve your spine, and keep the country from winning the war.”

Not long before the album was released, the routine got the comedian arrested for disturbing the peace when he performed it at an outdoor festival in Milwaukee. The following year, when a non-commercial New York radio station broadcast “Filthy Words,” a similar monologue from Carlin’s next album, a complaint from a member of a group called Morality in Media led to a legal dispute that would eventually rise all the way to the Supreme Court. Carlin’s graphic humor prefigured the rise of subscription television, boundless comedy, and social criticism and the fall of strict standards of behavior in American culture. “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” is now seen as a key turning point, both for better and for worse, in a culture that has grown far more permissive and open-minded than it was during the comedian’s own childhood years.

James Sullivan is the author of several books, including “Seven Dirty Words: The Life and Crimes of George Carlin.”

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

