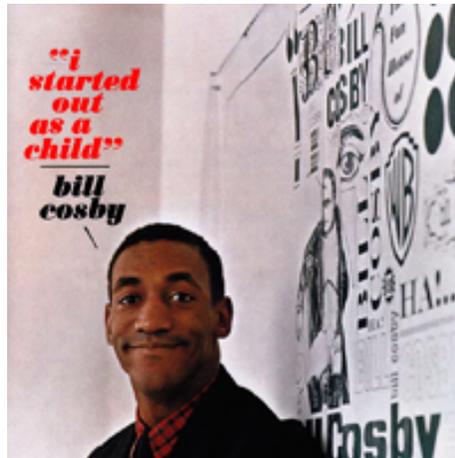


“I Started Out as a Child”—Bill Cosby (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album cover

The comedy album “I Started Out as a Child” by Bill Cosby was added to the National Recording Registry in 2009, five years before the numerous, rampant accusations of Cosby as a serial sexual predator against women were made public, accusations that forever altered Cosby’s public persona and legacy.

Recorded at Chicago’s legendary nightclub Mr. Kelly’s, “I Started Out as a Child” was released in 1964 and was Bill Cosby’s second comedy album. His first—“Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow...Right!”—appeared in 1963; his final comedy album, “Oh, Baby!,” was released in 1991. During his career, Cosby would issue a remarkably prolific 20 comedy LPs.

Before their gradual demise, comedy LP’s were an important and vital forum for stand-ups. Prior to the advent of cable TV and now streaming services, like Netflix or Hulu, comedians could only be seen by large groups via TV variety shows and late night talk shows where their humor was often truncated into short segments and, obviously, censored to fit broadcast standards. The arrival of “alternative” and college radio in the 1960s slowly allowed comedians a little more time leeway as to time, language and subject matter, an area that George Carlin (with his infamous “7 Dirty Words” routine) was happy to explore. But, even then, by and large, comedians could only reach mass audiences and indulge themselves freely when on vinyl which, in time, became its own respected genre of the recording industry and resulted in many bone fide classics like “The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart” (named to the Registry in 2006), and works by Richard Pryor, Nichols and May, Jonathan Winters and others.

When listened to today, it’s notable that Bill Cosby’s “I Started Out as a Child” is surprisingly short; it clocks in at only about 30 minutes. For the era, though, that was a normal length; later, comedy albums would grow longer—even up to an hour in duration.

The album also sounds rather segmented: assumedly it was recorded all at the same Mr. Kelly’s show but hard audio edits can be heard throughout the recording, effectively separating Cosby’s various comedy “bits” into music-album like “cuts.”

These “cuts” were then labeled/titled (as they are on the album’s original back cover) into short-handed identifiers. For example, some of the bits on this record have the following “titles”: “Sneakers”; “Street Football”; “The Water Bottle” and “Oops.” True to the album’s title, side “A” of the album largely concentrates on material devoted to Cosby’s youth (and seem to prefigure some of the themes Cosby later explored on his “Fat Albert” cartoon series of the

1970s). Side “B” goes off in different directions, talking about the city of Seattle, how werewolves might get a haircut, and the eating habits of Neanderthals. Throughout both sides, Cosby’s humor and topics are decidedly “G” rated and “safe.” There is no R-rated language here, and moreover, there is no political stance either, no reference to race or civil rights.

This, of course, is true to form for the Cosby persona. In what was quite possibly a very wise, if unintentional, decision, Cosby never based his humor on or around timely references. And, in many ways, this has worked in his career’s great favor, certainly it has added to his longevity. His comedy has a timelessness and is not easily dated by relying too heavily on material about hippies, LBJ, or other once newsworthy topics. Instead, Cosby has proven that he has the great ability to wring humor from real life situations, from common, shared experiences.

Cosby’s “generalness”—a term that should not be interpreted as a criticism—has also allowed him to appeal to all manner of people: conservatives, liberals, young, old, black and white.

It was Cosby’s early cross-sectional appeal that made him, when he first arrived on the scene, such an effective early voice and image in the civil rights movement. He was bridge, ambassador and advocate while leaving most of the more overt racial commentary to be addressed by the generation of stand-ups who arrived on the scene after him, for example, the aforementioned Richard Pryor. (In later years, Pryor freely admitted that he modeled much of his early stand-up on Cosby’s.)

It is that mass appeal that helped make him not only to be one of comedy’s most enduring stars, but also one of television’s too. One is hard pressed to name any small screen personality (with the exception of Lucille Ball) who has enjoyed more success in as many eras as Bill Cosby. Certainly, it is what made him at one time America’s favorite “father figure” via his massively successful 1980s sitcom “The Cosby Show.”

Along these same lines, it is interesting to note that, in comparison to many other legendary stand-ups, Cosby, while recognized as one of the artform’s great masters, is not recognized or synonymous with any particular signature bit that has defined him and his comedic voice the way that George Carlin had with his seven dirty words routine, Don Rickles had with his biting insults or Joan Rivers had with her outrageous celebrity takedowns. Cosby never even had his own catch-phrase, at least not one that ever caught on in the way that Rodney Dangerfield had “No respect” and Steve Martin had “Excuuuuse me!” and/or “Wild and crazy guy!”

When listened to today—if one can remove Cosby’s personal history from the disc’s actual contents--the half-hour of comedy of “I Started Out...” is enjoyable, funny and inventive, a master class in the art of stand-up. And it stands as a representative work of one of the last century’s most successful and influential comedians.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).