

“At Sunset”--Mort Sahl (1955)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Daniel Blazek



Original album cover



Original label



Mort Sahl

Recorded in 1955, Mort Sahl’s “At Sunset,” is the earliest example of modern stand-up comedy on record. No comedian before Mort Sahl had ventured very far from the clownish mother-in-law joke or other such vaudevillian patter. But Sahl broke new ground performing stand-up in a quick, literary way, molded in part by the rhythms of jazz and poetry of San Francisco. It had been the standard for comedians to don a suit and tie, stick to formulas, and try not to provoke the audience. “You couldn’t get on stage without a chorus of showgirls and a singer behind you,” Sahl once said. But Sahl defied the norm, wore casual sweaters, and addressed the audience as if they were a close acquaintance. On “At Sunset,” Sahl both rambles and zooms at breakneck speed through unique topical and political terrain. “At Sunset” is a well-spun pastiche of sophisticated ideas, an understated celebration of free-speech, and what historian Gerald Nachman has called “a tightly packed time capsule of mid-fifties lore.”

Sahl’s topical act reflected both the country’s ideals and post-war disillusionment. His knowing jabs at politicians and consumer society was courageous and thoroughly modern. It was bold anti-establishment satire that foretold that of Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22” and Richard Hooker’s “MASH.” Sahl was tackling the topics of an emerging modernist world: globalized, militarized, and industrial. He is acutely aware there is an absurdity around every corner and he peppers his act with clever turns of phrase. For example:

On the United Nations (“we now have 58 new enemies”); politics (“Roosevelt is to blame for all our psychological problems”); changing sexual mores (“some motels will require luggage”); student protests (“University of Cal students say Yankee go home”); poetry (“there’s symbolism that the grass is green”); finance (“it’s banker approved, but I don’t approve of bankers”); music (“east coast jazz is any record without Shorty Rogers”); the military (“every time there’s a submarine sighting, there’s a Salinas lettuce strike”); and psychology (“I’m not geared toward total acceptance”).

“At Sunset” demonstrated Sahl’s zestful exuberance at describing society’s rules being enforced to absurdity. There’s an underlying satire of strident militancy taken too far, the language of legalese deconstructed. His contradictory thoughts and eloquent delivery essentially defined

stand-up comedy for the modern era. Generations of comedians from Woody Allen and Shelley Berman and pundits from Andy Rooney to Jon Stewart are in his debt.

One well-constructed comedy bit from “At Sunset” describes an overly analytical bank teller dissecting a robber’s demands. The robber says, “Just act normally.” The teller says, “Define your terms.” A young Woody Allen who saw Sahl perform in New York, was said to be deeply affected by Sahl’s act. Allen’s first directorial comedy film, “Take the Money and Run,” contains a similar bank scene where the teller cannot read the robber’s note: Does this say “gun” or “gub”?

In his long career, Mort Sahl has been called a “modern Will Rogers,” a “moralist” by Studs Terkel, and the leader of the so-called “sick” comedians by “Time” magazine (a loose association that included 1960s comedians Nichols and May, Lenny Bruce, Bob Newhart, and Shelley Berman). As Sahl saw it, the most cynical comedians are given latitude if their cynicism is directed in broad and general terms, but when you got *specific* you were called “sick.” Sahl was adept at naming names. As biographer Gerald Nachtman has noted, “To use musicians’ terms, Mort really gets into the quarter notes on these issues [politics]. He knows the details and the nuances, and in many cases he knows the players personally, and he knows their histories and how they all intertwine....”

Jazz and jazz musicians should likely be credited with helping to define the improvisatory free-flowing style that Sahl and all subsequent comedians commandeered. “At Sunset” was recorded between sets at a Dave Brubeck concert at Sunset Auditorium in Carmel, California. Jazz was Sahl’s first love, and, as a GI bill student, he found himself cutting classes to hang out in the bohemian jazz dens of Berkeley. Sahl later wrote in his memoir, “Heartland,” “The debt to the humor of jazz musicians in general and Joe [Maney] in particular was never paid by the moviemakers/mythmakers.” The improvisational influence of jazz informs all of Sahl’s work and on “At Sunset,” you hear the musings of a true audiophile.

On “At Sunset,” Sahl jokes about a special jazz recording, where “every time you play it, the solos are different.” He mentions in jest the use of a “Swedish cactus needle” as a record stylus and jokes about using his entire house as a stereo speaker (perhaps a later influence on Steve Martin’s comedy bit about a massive “googlephonics” audio system). Sahl refers to jazz albums where, “the liner notes are sung and the lyrics are printed on the back.” All kidding aside, Sahl took his love of music seriously. He would emcee the first Monterey Jazz Festival, and won the Entertainer of the Year award from “Metronome Magazine,” the only non-musician ever so named. He opened for other musicians like Stan Kenton, and wrote liner notes for jazz artists including Bud Dashiell & the Kinsmen, the Paul Desmond Quartet, as well as for comedian Shelley Berman. He brought Berman and Jonathan Winters to record for Norman Granz’s formerly jazz-only label Verve Records.

Sahl’s ear for music served him well as a comedian, but he did not set out to become an entertainer. Mort Sahl’s father, Harry Sahl, was a failed playwright turned civil servant, and Mort inherited his father’s literary ideals amidst the rigors of practicality. At 17, idealistic Mort enlisted in 1945, only to have the war end and be stationed in Alaska for five years. Frustrated by the Army, he took advantage of the GI Bill to attend UC-Berkeley to study urban planning in

1950. His military experience and academic training combined to form a Kafkaesque worldview, and like his father before him, he wrote plays that went nowhere.

“I discovered I had to talk,” he said. Sahl’s plays served as raw material for his gnawing ambition, and his sense of urgency compounded in the post-war boom. He cut his own path of informed discourse straight from the day’s headlines, arming himself with a newspaper on stage to take on the day’s current events. “Jazz musicians were saying...my newspaper was my axe and I improvised within a chord structure...” Originally, he learned his craft in late-night Berkeley coffee houses, which bristled with politics, poetry and jazz. Not the typical environment to birth a comedy revolution, but he found the quickest shortcut to the stage was to perform his own material.

Sahl called himself “Cal Southern” early in his career and fashioned himself after the folksy Herb Shriner. He dropped this persona quickly, however. “It’s what I say that’s funny, not me,” he said. Sahl’s gleeful impetuosity could have gotten him blacklisted in the early 1950s, but progressive San Francisco largely embraced his edgy style. Making jokes about topical events and sitting Presidents was simply unheard of until Sahl tried it out.

In 1953, he performed at the fabled folk spot, the hungry i. It was a shaky start at first, but he turned the venue into a hot ticket for relevant political satire. Sahl helped carve a niche, not only for comedians, but for comedy as entertainment outside the typical nightclub environment. He helped Lenny Bruce get work there, and although Bruce would later be lionized for championing free speech (particularly in regard to religion), Sahl pioneered free speech in politics. Sahl commanded a three-year stint at the hungry i and would sharpen his chops to sold-out audiences. He became the toast of the town but also had his share of detractors. Hecklers threw pennies and at times it wasn’t even safe for him to leave the club.

Sahl himself is no particular fan of “At Sunset.” It was an unauthorized release set to capitalize on the success of Sahl’s landmark official first album, “The Future Lies Ahead” (otherwise known as “Mort Sahl, Iconoclast”). Released in 1958, “The Future Lies Ahead” brought Sahl’s revolutionary style of comedy to a national audience, and does so with a certain measured political focus. “At Sunset” was recorded three years earlier, but released a few months after “The Future Lies Ahead,” and then retracted. Nonetheless, “At Sunset” has no less charm, albeit a bit less polish, than Sahl’s official albums. “At Sunset” offers an aural glimpse into the cradle of modern American stand-up, revealing the breadth of Sahl’s talent teeming within the 1950s jazz cognoscenti.

While “At Sunset” has a bit less political commentary than his other albums, it has a much faster pace.* Sahl’s early love of auto racing could partly account for the brisk turns of phrase that propel the recording forward. Said Sahl, “I made the first comedy record in America, and although I hadn’t bargained for much more than telling jokes in San Francisco and racing sports cars...I like measuring distance, covering it, determining where I was, navigating across the alien planet...” On record, Sahl careens from topic to topic, hardly stopping to gauge his audience. (Perhaps it’s no coincidence that lightning wit Robin Williams also made his mark in the San Francisco comedy scene.) He told his biographer, “I was afraid no one would laugh and I

wanted to pretend I wasn't noticing the audience. I didn't want the audience to get the idea I was telling a joke and waiting for a laugh."

Mort Sahl, "iconoclast," didn't wait for our laughter, but thank goodness, we eventually caught up.

Daniel Blazek has worked in libraries since 1988, in a variety of positions. Formerly, he was the head of Government Information and Special Formats at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, and the Head of Library Services at the Miami International University of Art and Design. Presently, he is a recorded sound technician and archivist at the Library of Congress where he researches classic comedy of the 1960s and today.

*A technical footnote: if Sahl's pace seems a bit too quick on "At Sunset," it is. The material was sped up slightly to fit both of his 30-minute monologues onto each side of one LP disc. If you happen to have a variable speed turntable, slow it down to 32rpm to get a more natural pitch.