

**This interview with  
MORT SAHL  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on May 5, 2017**



*Mort Sahl*

**Library of Congress: What are your feelings, in 2017, about the “At Sunset” album? I read at one time that you had some mixed feelings about it.**

Mort Sahl: You know, it was illegal. It was stolen, recorded, by the Weiss Brothers who ran the Fantasy record label. They sold it commercially without any permission.... Later, they even sold the hungry i reunion. I was never compensated. And it was the first [stand-up] comedy record!

**LOC: You never saw any proceeds from the album at all?**

MS: No. But it opened up the whole record business to me and I signed with Verve records after that. I then brought a lot of other comics to them—Shelley Berman, George Carlin, Mike and Elaine. None of them had been recorded before. And I brought them Jonathan Winters, too.

**LOC: Have you listened to the album in subsequent years or is it a bit of a sore point?**

MS: It’s not a sore point, I just haven’t indulged myself. I think it was pretty revolutionary at the time...and still is. Today, still, many comedians are still pretty cautious. The country is obviously in trouble right now. The stakes are higher than ever and comedians don’t say anything! All they do is discredit people personally. It’s like this whole [Stephen] Colbert versus Trump thing—there’s no subtlety there...

I was on stage last night and I gave a medical report about Donald Trump. I said he was hospitalized for an attack of modesty.

Comedy should come out of opinion and it should take on the established order and make an audience take a second look at something. Too much comedy today is vulgar, not clever. I say that as a comedian, and as a consumer.

**LOC: You were on stage last night?**

MS: Oh, yes, I'm on stage every Thursday. I'm at Lucy Mercer's theater, the Throckmorton Theatre in San Francisco, Mill Valley. I've been doing every Thursday for two years now. And we have a sold out clientele now. The book ["Last Man Standing: Mort Sahl and the Birth of Modern Comedy" by James Curtis] is out now and that helps a lot but a lot of it is thanks to her.

**LOC: Comedy today, I would say, has changed considerably from what it used to be. What has been lost?**

MS: We've lost everything. Too many comedians today--they comfort themselves with mock debates. As far as I'm concerned, nobody is *really* covering the President. These late night shows are not doing it. Jimmy Kimmel; Jimmy Fallon, that's not "The Tonight Show." It should be funny. It can be funny, if you have any skills. No wonder people are tearing Comcast out of their houses.

**LOC: Do you think YOUR style of comedy changed over the years?**

MS: Not much. I'm still going for the throat. But the standard has to be funny. I like to go to something that is recognizable but people chose to ignore like the recent testimony of [James] Comey from the FBI, or the recent White House correspondent's dinner in Washington—that [dinner] is absurd, it's a self-congratulatory orgy.

You know, for comedy to work, dramatically, something must be at stake and, right now, America is at stake. But, too often, these comedy guys now only care about getting on and then getting off and getting rich.

**LOC: Do you think comedy can play a role in American democracy?**

MS: It played a role back with Will Rogers; it crystalized the problem. Bob Hope, Mark Twain. And then the trail starts to drivels off.

**LOC: After "At Sunset," you went on to make additional albums. Do you have a favorite among them?**

MS: No. I think I made eight or so. I had complete freedom, I could be completely topical.

You know, all those people I brought to Verve--they all ended up outselling me, by the way. I think Jonathan Winters was the most talented person I ever worked with; he was truly gifted. And he was Republican! He used to be so good on Jack Paar because Paar would just turn him loose and he'd be so unpredictable.

TV should not be predictable. Comedians have to challenge the power. Comedians should be dangerous and devastating AND FUNNY--that's the hardest part.

