



George Carlin

By Stephen Thompson

Originally Printed November 1999

“I don’t see any hope... short of some sort of interesting cataclysm. So I root for a cataclysm, for its own sake, just as entertainment.”

George Carlin has always straddled and blurred the line separating the mainstream from the counterculture, testing the boundaries of the First Amendment when he's not trying his hand at a Fox sitcom or MCI commercials. A successful author, recording artist, movie actor, and all-around icon, Carlin would remain famous even if he had stopped generating material after his legendary monologue about the seven words you can never say on television. Immediately following the release of a seven-disc box set, 1999's *George Carlin: The Little David Years*, the comic spoke to The Onion A.V. Club about language, religion, hope, and the story behind his work as a phone-company pitchman.

The Onion: *Is anything shocking anymore?*

George Carlin: Um, no. It depends on who's receiving the shock. Obviously, there are people who constrict themselves and build walls around themselves, whether it's from a moral standpoint or a patriotic standpoint or just plain old conformity, and who therefore live in those little prisons, and when things breach those walls, it's shocking for them. But I think for my little segment of the public... I have broad recognition, and then I have a some-

what narrower following, and I fill up theaters of 2,000–2,500 seats about 100 nights a year, so I have a nice little niche. And to my folks, there are only degrees of surprise. I think of shock as kind of an uptown form of surprise. Comedy is filled with surprise, so when I cross a line... I like to find out where the line might be and then cross it deliberately, and then make the audience happy about crossing the line with me. In the case of the most recent HBO show, the *You Are All Diseased* show, it's children. This is one of the new sacred areas in our lives, one of the taboos, so I like taking on that whole parent/child culture that's developed—this insane, neurotic over-parenting. And then the God thing at the end has been an ongoing thing of mine, attacking religion in various ways. I try to get a little something in each show. But this time, I actually said He doesn't exist, and He should strike me dead if He does, and He doesn't strike me dead. So I like finding out where I can push it a little farther, even with my own people.

O: *Do you get to the point where you run the risk of going too far where it's not funny anymore?*

GC: No, because the first obligation I have is to be funny; it's my first impulse and an instinct.

I like being funny and finding the jokes. I like big jokes. Secondly, I like my jokes to be built on a foundation of ideas, or at least smart observations, and then if I can add stunning or spectacular—and I use the words advisedly—language... I don't necessarily mean dirty language, but rhetorical flourishes, things that have rhythm to them and have kind of a value of their own in just the way they sound. If I can add that, I'm really happy. So it's laughs first, but because my slant and my attitude are based on questioning values, there are ideas already in the work. I just make sure that I'm always funny. I know if I'm consistently funny, I can take a long stretch and get a little... not serious, not preachy, but where there aren't as many laughs. There's a little more tone to it.

O: *A few of the seven words are actually on TV now, where you've got "shit" on Chicago Hope. How do you feel about that?*

GC: Well, it's always been kind of a false arrangement anyway. When I was a little boy, I was taught to look up to policemen, look up to military personnel, and look up to sports figures. We all know how they speak, so apparently the message was, "These people have not

"The pursuit of goods and possessions has completely corrupted the human experience, along with religion, which I think limits the intellect."

been corrupted morally. Therefore, I can derive from that that dirty language didn't corrupt them morally." There's no foundation for this language being harmful in any way. It's just rude to some people, less rude to others. So it's one of those fake barriers that's rooted in a fake morality about sex, the body parts that produce sexual experience—and, as it happens, bathroom experience—and an ultimate fear of the human body and sexuality. And, therefore, I don't honor those arbitrary demar-

cations, and that's that.

O: *Is there such a thing as a politically correct comedian? It's a pet peeve of mine: Every press release I get announces, "He's a politically incorrect comedian!"*

GC: Well, there shouldn't be, and one person's correctness is another person's incorrectness. Here we are, back at arbitrary standards. I understand the need not to unnecessarily insult or hurt people's feelings, but I also understand the need for an honest exchange of ideas, even in the form of entertainment and art—and especially, maybe, in the form of art. I use words that some people who didn't know me well enough, or didn't know my work well enough, could interpret as, well, "He's a complete anti-this or anti-that, he's phobic about this," or whatever. And my argument is that that's not who I am. I do not believe language has that kind of power. I do not believe the occasional use of a derogatory term, used in a non-insulting way, is harmful. So I use 'em, and I think it's up to the people and society to know the difference between hate speech and casual use of slang terms.

O: *You've said, "If you think there's a solution, you're part of the problem." Do you really lack hope?*

GC: Well, they say, "If you scratch a cynic, underneath you'll find a disappointed idealist." So I would imagine that there's some little flame, however weak, that still burns, but I know time is against my seeing that. I think this world would need a long time, maybe a thousand years, to evolve to what may be a golden age, and in the meantime, there are all these very small, parochial struggles between peoples of different language and color and arbitrary political and national boundaries. And my understanding of it is that there is no hope, because I think we're locked in by commerce. The pursuit of goods and possessions has completely corrupted the human experience, along with religion, which I think limits the intellect. With those two things in place as firmly as they are, I don't see any hope for get-

ting around them short of some sort of interesting cataclysm. So I root for a cataclysm, for its own sake, just as entertainment. I don't even care if it has a good result. We're circling the drain, and I just like seeing the circles get faster and shorter all the time.

O: *I was reading your web site [georgecarlin.com], and you referred to George W. Bush as a fascist. But you don't vote. Why not vote against someone you think is a fascist?*

GC: Well, because it wouldn't make any difference. When fascism comes to this country, it won't be wearing jackboots; it'll be wearing sneakers with lights in them, and it'll have a smiley face and a Michael Jordan T-shirt on. They learned the mistake of overt control. They've learned how to be much subtler. No, I don't think my vote would mean anything, and at the same time, it would make me very untrue to myself to participate in what I really think is a charade.

O: *Well, you more or less hate society anyway, don't you?*

GC: Um, I'm very disrespectful of it, and I'm contemptuous of it, but I don't think hate is in me, although we use that word the same way we use love: "Oh, boy, I love ice cream and I hate the Dodgers." But it is a distaste, a contempt, a dissatisfaction, a disillusionment, and a lot of qualities and feelings that come together and appear as anger onstage. I don't experience them as anger, I experience them as a deep distaste. I'm splitting semantic hairs here, but that's what they're for.

O: *A lot of people like you seem to be running for president under the Reform Party.*

GC: [Laughs.] I know. Well, you see, there's another thing: The Reform Party should be a serious reform party. This culture won't allow that, and most likely the Democrats and the Republicans are feeding that clown aspect of the Perot paranoia, whatever quality about Jesse Ventura they don't like, Pat Buchanan... They just demonize people. This culture is set up to end the debate before it even begins. The boundaries of debate are decided long

before *Nightline* goes on the air by who they've selected to sit there. You don't see the fringe people—they put on Perot and put on Jesse Ventura largely, they think, to expose them as clowns. It's just funny to watch the gyrations and the machinations and the gymnastics that this culture goes through to bullshit itself. It's fun. To me, it's all entertainment. I'm here for the show. Philosophers say,

“Even Ted Kaczynski, who hated technology, used a typewriter to type his manifesto. So who's a sellout?”

“Why are we here?” I'll tell you why: I'm here for the show. I love it, and they entertain me to no end.

O: *You mentioned before that you have wide recognition. Like it or not, you're part of mainstream society.*

GC: Sure, absolutely. That's one of the interesting and odd things about my own success: It's rooted in a distinctly anti-mainstream point of view. And yet, in order for me to project that, I have to put my foot in the stream. I wrote a thing for my web page called “The Big Sellout.” A couple of people took issue with my doing a commercial for 10-10-220...

O: *I was going to ask you about that.*

GC: Yeah, well, that will soon be on the web site in a very complete form. There's an explanation of first of all why I would make that decision—and it's always for money, of course, but why money was important to me at that moment. That's on there. And then, more important, an examination of this whole idea of selling out. It's uttered and spat at you as if it were an absolute; you did it or you didn't. And this person at home saying it probably has on a Gucci shirt or a McDonald's hat, and he has a telephone and he might even own a little bit of stock, and he has made some adjustments along the way himself. He

doesn't live in the woods and eat bark and make his own clothing out of vines. No one is really pure. There is a continuum, and it's up to each person to decide what decisions are worth making to accommodate yourself to the system in order to do what you want to do. Even Ted Kaczynski, who hated technology, used a typewriter to type his manifesto. He rode buses to go to the post office to use a government agency to deliver his bombs, which were also a form of crude technology. So who's a sellout? That's what the whole thing is about.

O: *Was it simply a matter of money?*

GC: I had 20 years of tax struggle, which I've talked about publicly before, and what I did in this thing on the web page is give the history of the development of that back-taxes debt, and how penalties and interest prevent you

“It’s just funny to watch the gyrations and the machinations and the gymnastics that this culture goes through to bullshit itself.”

from chopping it down to size very quickly. It took 20 years. And what happened, the short-hand of it is, my wife died about two and a half years ago. I met a woman and we're very in love, and it's a magnificent experience that's going on between Sally and me. I just didn't want to get into this relationship with any vestige of that tax problem still lingering. I had it down to several hundred thousand dollars—maybe \$350,000—and I said, “I need a quick source of unexpected income.” I didn't go hunting: MCI had already approached me, and they made a lot of concessions to try to make it consistent with my personal approach to stand-up, and to make me seem less like a pitchman. Anyway, for whatever compromise there was, for my purposes it was a good one, and I think no harm was done to the culture or

to myself.

O: *You tend to shy away from topical humor, and it was interesting listening to the box set: It didn't feel that much like a product of its era, and it still seemed fairly fresh. Is that why you avoid topicality?*

GC: Yeah, that's the effect, and I welcome that effect, to have the stuff not be dated. But the purpose was to not be a slave to the headlines. If I'm going to do a show at 8:30 that night and something happens that afternoon that everybody knows about, I'm sort of obliged to have a few funny things to say about it if I'm known for some topical commentary. So, rather than do that and also have to throw things away that develop... Let's say a story is good for a month and you have a little routine, and it's getting better and better, and now it's up to about five minutes and it's really nice, and then the story is kind of dead and stale. Then you're stuck with five dated minutes, or you're throwing away something very nice that you've crafted. I don't like that feeling, so to avoid it, I just say, “Well, I'll be a little less timely and more timeless.”

O: *Do you still want to do TV?*

GC: No, I don't want to do commercial TV on any sustained basis. I like using the Lenos and Lettermans to promote my stuff, and HBO is my home and always will be. I've had my little forays and sidetracks into different parts of show business where I didn't have a good fit, but there was always some stupid local reason I had for trying it, and then I'd say, “Ugh, there I go again. Fuck 'em.” That's where I am now.

O: *The pace of your act has sort of accelerated over the years, even as you go through the box set.*

GC: Well, that especially happened in the '90s, as I realized I had to raise my voice literally and in a figurative sense, to raise the stakes a little bit on stage in order to compete with a very noisy culture. There's a lot of din in the culture, and to get attention, you have to raise your voice.

O: *Aren't you supposed to be slowing down?*

GC: Yeah, that's the "old" deal, yeah. That's right. You know, I'm blessed with a great genetic package: Among the genetic qualities I got for free was this energy and stamina, as

well as great enthusiasm and a positive, optimistic sense of self. My personal sphere is really positive. It's the world that I have my doubts about. ☺