

George Carlin Wasn't Ahead of His Time, He Transcended Time

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August, 2022



The magic of art is its ability to transcend time and space. A sight, a sound, a song can change the year; a collage of color or collection of words can alter your point of view. A record on the radio transports me back to my high school cafeteria. And when I saw the documentary “George Carlin’s American Dream” on HBO it was suddenly the 1970s and I was in the Moylan Tavern on Broadway just

below 125th Street.

When I moved to New York City in 1972 it was a tough town spiraling toward economic collapse. White flight was in full force as the middle class moved to the suburbs, widening the gap between the rich and poor. Wall Street was the above-ground economy but heroin and illegal gambling was where the real money was. The West Side highway literally fell down; subway doors didn’t open; only those looking for trouble went into Central Park at night.

In May of 1972, a few months before turning 22, I left bucolic Lancaster, Pa., where I attended Franklin & Marshall College, for New York to try to be a journalist. I shared my first apartment on the top floor at 3117 Broadway with two other guys, one of whom was robbed in the elevator by a man with a shotgun. My first adjustment was to get use to the sound of broken glass as teens partied on the roof and tossed their empty beer bottles into the back courtyard.

That apartment was on the block north of 122nd Street. On the next block north – between LaSalle Avenue and Tiemann Place – was the Moylan Tavern, a bar next to Thrifty Market, a bodega owned by Angel Diaz, a Cuban who fled Castro a dozen years earlier. There was nothing about the Moylan that was welcoming – it was a place for regulars – and I walked past it for about a year until I got the nerve to go in. When I finally pushed open that heavy door I truly entered New York.

The connection here is that George Carlin grew up on 121st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue. When he came back to the one-time Irish-Catholic neighborhood that was by then well integrated, George came to the Moylan. Many of the regulars in the bar knew George and while watching "George Carlin's American Dream" I saw a still photo of one of them – Doc Strom. George and Doc met in elementary school and remained close friends even after Carlin moved to California.

I never knew what Doc did for work, just that he wore a black suit, white shirt and skinny black tie every day, was in the Moylan by early afternoon, sipped an endless succession of Rheingold draft beers as he read the Daily News and the Post cover-to-cover through thick glasses and, when he came across an item he found worthy of sharing, would chuckle, his shoulders bouncing up around his ears as, with a glint in his eyes, he would say: "Hey, hey, dig this..."

The first time I went into the Moylan was in the afternoon – probably 1973 – and Doc was the only other person in the place except for the owner/bartender Jimmy McDonagh. Jimmy was selectively hard of hearing: If he wanted to ignore you he acted as if he didn't hear you. He once said he'd never in his life been to Brooklyn because there was nothing there he needed and that Connecticut bothered him because it had too many trees.

Doc and I hit it off immediately. We talked about writing and journalism. We talked about Carlin's pioneering humor dealing with the Vietnam War, civil rights, the environmental crisis George saw coming way before most, the hypocrisy of religion, the contradictions of censorship, Roe v. Wade the first time around, the time when women needed prescriptions for birth control and the use of language.

Doc and I also talked about baseball and would partner shooting 8-ball on the undersized pool table that required a cut-down cue stick for many shots because of the claustrophobic walls. He could drink those water glass-sized draft beers for hours but be as sober as a judge when it came time for him to shoot. If I missed a shot and Doc was my partner he'd say: "Hey, this is for two dollars..."

And Doc introduced me to his neighborhood friends: Joey, Tommy, Franny, Gene, Sully, Eddie, Shotgun Charley Kelly and more. Probably because Doc

accepted me, they did as well. We shot pool, went to Opening Day at Yankee Stadium, laughed and drank. Twice, I had the joy of joining them when Carlin came to town and laid free tickets on the Moylan crowd. George popped into the Moylan in 1975 to say he was in town to host the premier of a new show – Saturday Night Live. Doc introduced me to him and we talked journalism.

Once, Carlin was performing at a hotel in Paramus, N.J., and invited us all out. George had set up a room with food and drink and the New York Giants were playing the 4 p.m. NFL game, which we watched before his 8 p.m. show. George stopped by to bust on his old friends. I saw that he was not only an extremely smart man but also an extremely nice man. His loyalty to his roots – his friends – was unshaking.

Almost never did I take anyone from my other world into the Moylan Tavern. It was my way of showing respect for the privacy of these people who took me in. When I met Jim Higgins, a former New York City fireman disabled in an on-the-job injury and now doing clerical work, I thought he would get it.

When Jim walked into the Moylan, looked at the tiny pool table, uneven barstools and few bench seats, one held up my two paint cans and another with a knife slash through its plastic covering, he said: “This looks like a place that elephants come to die.” That death came in 1977 when the Moylan closed its doors for good, the struggle for economic survival just too much for Jimmy.

Doc Strom died in the early 2000s and George came to deliver the eulogy. In the days before the service, Carlin had taken Doc’s ashes and deposited them at places that mattered to his friend. Corpus Christi School in Morningside Heights, Yankee Stadium, where the Moylan Tavern was. The theme of Carlin’s eulogy was: “Places I Left Doc.” He said goodbye to his friend with a laugh – actually, with a lot of laughs.

George Carlin – who had years of sobriety after decades of drug abuse – died of heart failure in 2008 at the age of 71. If the words penned by Bob Dylan, “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now,” ever applied to anyone they applied to George Carlin.

The documentary chronicles how Carlin evolved from wanting to be a film star like Danny Kaye to becoming a social critic who guided two generations of

Americans through changes while also cautioning in eerily prophetic ways about climate change, the threat of runaway viruses and the rollback of rights for women. He talked about how many Americans believe in free speech only if what you are saying is what they believe in. He got a lot right.

In the movie “Jersey Girl” the father of the Ben Affleck character is played by Carlin. When Affleck’s wife dies and he becomes a single parent he leaves his high-powered Manhattan job and moves with his infant daughter into his father’s home in New Jersey, taking a job driving a street cleaner. When his daughter gets older, Affleck has an opportunity to move back to New York and resume his old career.

Carlin encourages him to make the move. Affleck says to Carlin: “But Dad, you don’t want to live alone.” Carlin responds: “Living alone is easy; dying alone is hard.” That is a sentence that could very well have been written by George Carlin. Clever. Truthful. Painful. Words and observations that didn’t so much make us laugh as make us think. That’s who George was. He used words as a weapon to slice through the lies that prop up inequity.

“We have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values.” Carlin said in one of his routines. “We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We’ve learned how to make a living but not a life. We’ve added years to life, not life to years.”

I still have the album “Class Clown” and after seeing “George Carlin’s American Dream” I popped it into the CD machine. The routines “I Used to Be Irish-Catholic,” “Muhammad Ali” and “The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” are as funny now as they were 50 years ago. And as truthful.

That, after all, is one of the characteristics that defines art: It is timeless.

Thank you, Judd Apatow and Michael Bonfiglio for directing this documentary. Thank you, George Carlin for being one of the two or three writers who had the greatest impact on my personal and professional life. Thank you, Doc Strom and all the denizens of the Moylan Tavern. It was my Last Chance Saloon in Eugene O’Neil’s “The Iceman Cometh.”

The Moylan Tavern was my doorway into New York, New York – the city so nice they named it twice. And George Carlin made it twice as funny.