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# Mort Sahl: 'I Am the Permanent Opposition to the Establishment'

By William Gilkerson

MORT SAHL sat at a corner table at Enrico's, bemused, considering. He had been asked to capsule a description of himself and his career in, say, 25 words or less. He clasped his hands, gazed intently at his coffee spoon and had at it:

"I am the permanent opposition to the Establishment. Since there is no opposition politically any more. I have become everyone's conscience, through some weird set of circumstances. I have become, ironically enough, a positive force. It isn't that I've changed, it's that America is so hell bent on suicide that I'm in the unlikely position of standing at the edge of the cliff and saying — 'Wait a minute, have you thought this over?'"

It was in 1953 that Mort Sahl began talking professionally, and his first record came four years later — the first of the mass-appeal comedy talk records. Within a short time there were other records. And contracts. The open-throated shirt, the sweater and the blue jeans were nationally known trademarks. There was a Time cover, major feature articles in slick magazines and a lot of money.

Mort Sahl was more than representing the liberal left. He was the liberal left, and the only thing really controversial about him seemed to be how to tag him. He wasn't, in the strict sense, a comic. But of course he was. Humorist, comedian, satirist — they were all tried on and rejected. Finally it was decided he was an iconoclast (Iconoclast: "One who attacks cherished beliefs as impositions or sham, or frauds").

He was a latter day G. B. Shaw — wielding the bludgeon of instant insight. He had wit, but more important he had the seeming ability to peer into any political situation, no matter how complicated, and get immediately through the thick crust of complicated nuances, overtones, false hypotheses and reach the meat of it all with a few deft strokes, exposing political bunk in the full blossom of all its absurdity. They were the fine days.

Eight years passed.

Currently Mort Sahl is playing in the dining room at the hungry i. Indefinitely. He has few other firm commitments. Little TV, no radio, no other major night clubs. He has been fired from his radio and TV shows and the big clubs won't touch him.

Why? There are several viewpoints on this. According to many critics he simply stopped being funny. According to others it was Sahl's point position in the militant vanguard of those advocating that President Kennedy's death was the result of a plot. It is true that this has been Sahl's idee fixe since the assassination — talking to audience after audience on the subject.

But Sahl feels differently. "It really began before the assassination — in 1959. Pe-



MORT SAHL

Eight years later ...

ter Lawford and I had the same agent at that time, Milt Ebbins. He arranged for me to meet with Ambassador Kennedy, and the ambassador asked me to write material for his son. So I did. Then Lawford and Ebbins served notice on me that I was to leave John Kennedy alone when I was onstage — that he was not to be treated as mortal. If I tore into him I was told there would be dire consequences.

"What? I asked. 'You'll see,' they said. So I went ahead and did it anyway. Suddenly the William Morris Agency no longer was interested in handling me. Why not? Then my press agent dropped me. Then I found myself in Los Angeles, surrounded by politically liberal casting directors and producers who for some reason wouldn't employ me, although I meant big money. I got a few jobs, yeah. But I got fired from all sides, too."

(Then came the assassination. Sahl, on his TV show, in pre-Garrison days: "I want to know who killed the President. He is a restless spirit even now. I charge the government with suppressing the facts. I charge the Chief Justice with distorting the evidence, and I charge the American people with complicity by their indifference to terror. His blood is on your hands." Recent Sahl, post-Garrison: "The crime has been solved by Jim Garrison, the District Attorney of New Orleans. He has a completely structured case. He knows who pulled the trigger, and it was not Oswald.")

Mort Sahl sighed. "I've heard 'You've gone too far with this assassination thing. people don't want to hear it — too much. When I was fired from one of my shows I was told I'd bored people with all this stuff. They said I was being fired for theatrical reasons, not political ones: I believed them. The next day they got 31,000 letters protesting my firing."

And the rating of the show at that time? A mirthless laugh. "There again we find that capitalism is suspended in my case. My radio program in Los Angeles was the highest rated program in night time radio. The TV show? A very healthy rating and a money maker. That's quoting the station managers. So my troubles were started with the Establishment and not with the audience."

Why have certain of his critics charged him with selling out to establishment? he professes to attack?

"I think as far as my being in the establishment, well, the wounds that have been inflicted on me since I started off about the assassination are indication enough I'm not with the establishment. The critics have, it's true, come across with an orchestrated attack on this. 'How can we trust a guy who has dinner at the White House all the time?' they say."

*Original filed under Sahl, Mort*

House:

"Never." A grin. "I've seen there a couple of times, though."

There are other press people Sahl takes exception to. "The ones in the press who ridicule the conspiracy theory, the columnists who call Garrison or myself insane — I think some of them are in the pay of the CIA. I know that sounds paranoid, but I

want you to chew on that for a while.

Sahl talked on the FBI and CIA, pointing out that Garrison was being closely watched, that he, Sahl, had been tailed, and that both their phones were bugged. (Garrison and Sahl are in fairly close communication, and it was allegedly Sahl

who convinced Hugh Hefner to undertake and publish the recent Playboy interview with Garrison.) Does Sahl fear for his safety in this cloak and dagger atmosphere?

"No. They have other ways of killing you."

Who are "they?"

"Whoever made the original phone call from Washington to Hollywood telling people not to hire me. This way I'm paralyzed. It's more effective than murder. But I've refused to die."

How does Sahl feel his audiences are receiving his messages today?

"Pretty good. They've fallen into bad habits after listening to Bill Cosby and to Woody Allen. But when I

once I just say 'Ronald Reagan' and they slide back to me. You can't completely expect them to like it, but if you want the comfort of laughter as a performer you've got to go a different way. As it happens, I'm getting bigger laughs."

Your career has already suffered, and what's left of it seems largely dedicated to Garrison's success with his case. What happens to your career if Garrison fails?

"No, I'm not pinning my hopes on anybody. I'm wondering what's going to happen to the country. I'm wondering if we're all going to live, whether we're all going to be blown up trying to keep an Asian Empire, or whether there's going to be an election in '68, or whether there are going to be more riots in the street, or what."

"I can't even think in terms of career. America is in the role of keeping the fire going — a comfortable fire in the living room — by burning the furniture. How long can you keep that up? How can you plan any kind of a career in that atmosphere?"

Do you not plan any further career in that eventuality?

"Well, with my particular talent I will manage to get into something else that bothers the Establishment. I'll get into the next issue. Which will bug them. But if the Garrison thing doesn't come off, we're all going to lose in this sense — we won't be living in the same country we were born in. If the neo-Nazis here find they've gotten away with the assassination, and that the government will ratify and counter-sign the lie, and will go along for reasons of their own, and everybody will compromise, and no one will speak up, what will that leave us?"

You attack the Establishment. Who, other than the people themselves, do you consider non-Establishment?

"Kennedy's few remaining friends. Look at them. Mark Lane, a lawyer who doesn't practice; Mort Sahl, a comedian who doesn't comed, Jim Garrison, a DA in the south who never met him."

Anyone in the government itself?

"Well, Percy. And Fulbright." It was pointed out that he had taken a couple of passing swipes at Fulbright in his last show: "Did I?" A grin. "Well, you know, everybody's too mild for my taste. That's my professional posture. My official position has to be — if there were only two people left on earth — you and me — and you took my position on something, I'd have to oppose you." He laughed, and for the first time that afternoon not cynically, then added, "The job is to express in words what others suppress in thoughts, to crystallize the courage of the American people."

SAN FRANCISCO  
CHRONICLE

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