

M MANIFESTO



Man at his best

Lenny Bruce

By Philip Watson

On the 40th anniversary of his death, we celebrate the Sixties stand-up who broke down barriers, defied the censors and reinvented comedy. And paid the price

LENNY BRUCE ARRIVED IN LONDON IN 1962 WITH A REPUTATION: THE MAN WHO REVOLUTIONISED STAND-UP. Instead of the prepared jokes on predictable subjects then prevalent, his routines were made up of free-associating stories and skits that took on the subjects of religion, race, sex, drugs, politics and patriotism in confrontational style.

It had won him hero worship among liberal intellectuals, Hollywood celebrities and hip insiders. It had also earned him titles such as “the sickest of the sick”, “the man from outer taste” and “America’s number one vomit”, and landed him in trouble – just before arriving in London he had been put on trial in San Francisco on charges of obscenity.

Britain was not exactly ready for him. Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller had certainly caused a stir with *Beyond the Fringe*, a satirical show that for the first time tackled such sacred cows as the Prime Minister, Shakespeare and the Queen. Its success had led Cook to set up The Establishment, a small club on the first floor of a former Soho strip joint, which was where Bruce was to perform in 1962. But >

Coming for your soul:
a youthful Lenny Bruce
in 1963, before the drugs,
busts and harassment

the country as a whole was still in the grip of post-war Conservative austerity; the Sixties had not yet started swinging. Cook and his cohorts were thrilled and awed by Bruce's fearless and freewheeling brand of sharp-tongued, foul-mouthed comedy. Celebrated British drama critic Kenneth Tynan proclaimed him "a true iconoclast... who breaks through the barrier of laughter to the horizon beyond where the truth has its sanctuary." But not everyone shared these views. During Bruce's shows there were cries of



Lenny Bruce talks Religion

America's new religious leaders are holding a sales conference in the plush New York headquarters of Religions, Inc when a phone call comes in from Pope John XXIII. Lenny Bruce plays Southern televangelist Oral Roberts, who takes the call... "Yes operatuh, yes, alrigh', ah'll take the charges... yeah... yeah... HELLO JOHNNY! WHAT'S SHAKIN' BABY? Meant to congratulate you on the election... that puff of white smoke was a genius stroke - kept it in the papers faw six days... Great!... We got an eight-page layout in *Viceroy* magazine - 'The New Pope Is a Thinking Man'. Ah'll send you a tear sheet on it... yeah, yeah... same old jazz... How's your old lady?... [aside to Christian evangelist Billy Graham] Hey, Billy! Yew wanna say something to 'im?... [back on phone] Billy wants to know if you get him a deal on one o' those Dago sports cahs... Ferali or some dumb thing... yeah, yeah... [lowers voice] Oh, lissen here: ah'm sendin ovuh a real winnuh - a kid about twenny-three... Greatest showman you've evuh seen. We grossed \$73,000 in four days in Oakland. Great boy... yeah... Well, he does 'Throw Away the Crutches' and 'See Again'. Good timing, knows when to quit... yeah...yeah... When you comin' to the coast? I can get ya the Steve Allen Show on the 19th... Jus' wave, thass awl. Wear the big ring... yeah... yeah... yeah... OK, Sweetie... yeah... Yew cool it, too... NO, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE JEWISH!"

"shame", glasses thrown at the stage, even fistfights. There were regular walkouts, and not just by shocked middle-class "stiffos", as Lenny would refer to them. Playwright John Osborne, who had penned the original "angry young man" drama, *Look Back in Anger*, and dissident Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, walked.

Lenny Bruce was dark, dangerous and derisive, and he made Cook and his Oxbridge friends look like a comfortable cabaret. "If *Beyond the Fringe* was a pinprick," said Tynan, "Mr Bruce was a bloodbath."

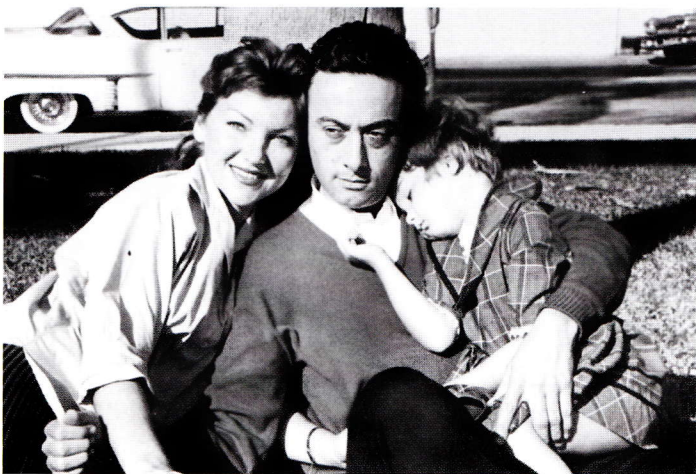
By the end of his engagement, Bruce was being hounded by an outraged press, and he was rushed out of the country. A year later, after he had been arrested again on obscenity charges and busted for drugs, Cook applied for permission to bring him back to London. On arriving at Heathrow he was swiftly deported, the Home Secretary declaring that his presence in the country "would not be in the public interest". He was invited to take part in the 1963 Edinburgh Festival, but was again refused entry to Britain. He never did return.

LENNY BRUCE WAS BORN LEONARD ALFRED SCHNEIDER IN LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK IN 1925. His father, Mickey, was born in Kent, England, but the family emigrated in 1905. His mother, Sally, a Jewish stage performer and comedienne, took her son to a striptease show when he was just 11, and later encouraged him in his ambition to work on stage, helping him to develop his material and hone his delivery. She would remain his close friend, associate and confidante throughout his career.

At the age of 17, he joined the US Navy and saw active duty in Europe during World War II, but was given a dishonourable discharge in the autumn of 1945, after pretending to be homosexual. Deciding that his future lay on the stage or in the movies, he adopted a matinee-idol look and started doing impressions of film stars in clubs around New York.

At first he was nervous and clichéd, and had no material of his own. But gradually he started to hang out with the new-style comics, inspired Jewish showbiz guys who liked to improvise and use hip lingo, underworld argot and Yiddish slang. He got into jazz and hipster intellectualism. As Albert

Booed off: April 1963, Bruce is refused entry to Britain because it would "not be in the public interest". **Below,** with his wife, Honey, and daughter, Kitty, in 1960

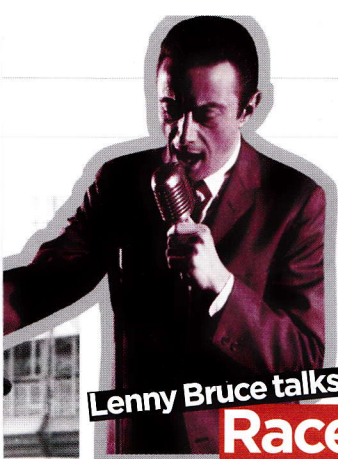


Goldman, biographer of Elvis Presley and John Lennon, writes in his book *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, "Lenny learned to be funny... Funny guys were the guys with an original point of view, a private language, a sound. The Jewish equivalent of the black jazzman. A hero."

He then learned to translate this private world to the stage, to develop it into a public performance. He learned the tricks of stand-up, the timing, the rhythm, the dexterity, the dialects. He learned to handle risk and rejection. He learned how to make a show sound spontaneous and fraternal, as if he was addressing you personally across the table as one of the guys.

In 1953, he went to California, where he tried to make it as a screenwriter and actor in Hollywood B-movies. Mostly, however, he worked the burlesque and strip clubs of LA, and soon his act became raunchier, sexier, angrier,

CAMERA PRESS | DENNIS STOCK | IREX



Lenny Bruce talks **Race**

From a skit called "How to Relax Coloured People at Parties", in which Lenny plays both the White Man and the Negro...

WHITE MAN [rasping voice]: Oh, boy, what a hell of a party, eh?

NEGRO [clear, well-educated]: Yeah, I'm enjoying myself, having a wonderful time...

WHITE: I didn't get your name.

NEGRO: Miller.

WHITE: Miller, my name is

Mr Anderson.

NEGRO: Mr Anderson, glad to know you.

[Pause]

WHITE: You know, that Joe Louis was a hell of a fighter... What a man, boy.

NEGRO: Yeah, got right in there, right out.

WHITE: He's a credit to your race. Don't you ever forget that, you sonofagun.

NEGRO: Well, thank you very much.

WHITE: That's alright, perfectly alright...

I guess you know a lotta people in the showbusiness, eh?

NEGRO: Yeah, I've met quite a few in my travels...

WHITE: Yeah, boy... You get anything to eat yet?

NEGRO: No, I'm kinda hungry.

WHITE: I haven't got any fried chicken or watermelon, ahhh... raisins or rice, whatever you people eat, but

aaaahhh, we'll get sometin' up for you there... You know sometin', you're

awright. How 'bout that. You're OK. You're really a good guy.

NEGRO: Well, thank you.

[Pause]

WHITE: Here's to all coloured people.

NEGRO: OK.

WHITE: Awright... [Whispers] So you really like to do it to everybody's

sister, right?

NEGRO: Well, no, you missed the vernacular. It's not everybody's sister, I do it to sisters...

WHITE: Ah, that's impossible. Oh, I never knew that! Ah, that's a lotta

horseshit, you can't do that to the sisters. Do they put out, those sisters?...

[Whispers again] I heard you guys got a wang on ya, ya sonofagun, ya!

NEGRO: Yes, uh... well, I mean, you know... it's sort of like a baby's arm

with an apple in its fist. I think that's what Tennessee Williams said.

It was a charm that, combined with his modern, edgy, film-star good looks – Albert Goldman wrote that he looked like “some New Wave writer figuring out an existential detective story that could run in *Esquire* while they were filming it in St Tropez” – had a considerable effect on women.

Throughout his life he was an archetypal playboy and committed womaniser. After his shows ended, it was party time, and Lenny used to boast that his goal was at least “one girl a day”. He dated several famous

freer. The cruder the club (he called them “toilets”), the more creative and crazy his act became. He would talk about sexual fantasies and perversions, or walk on stage naked. The genesis of the Lenny Bruce cult was formed. He was becoming notorious, “sick”, the comedy rebel with a cause.

He played a club called Ann's 440 in San Francisco in 1957 and was officially “discovered”. It was the time of the Beats, poetry, jazz and Allen Ginsberg's “Howl”, of nonconformity and abstraction, and Bruce's debunking of politics and religion (he'd recently developed the “Religions, Inc” sketch, *opposite*), and of the hypocrisy of American social and sexual mores, chimed with the times. “They call Lenny Bruce a sick comic – and sick he is,” wrote influential San Francisco critic Herb Caen. “Sick of the pretentious phoniness of a generation that makes his humour meaningful... There are shirts that need unstuffing, egos that need deflating, and precious few people to do the sticky job with talent and style.”

In 1961, he performed to 3,000 people in New York's Carnegie Hall, and he was at the height of his art and powers. Albert Goldman describes it in his biography as “the greatest statement of his new unstructured humour that he had yet made... Brilliant, vivid, variegated, moody, honest, fantastic and incredibly candid.” It is a performance that is still available, on CD.

Two years later, *Playboy* magazine serialised his autobiography over six issues, and the underground cult had become almost mainstream. Except that the show was pretty much over for Lenny Bruce by then. The law, the system, and the drugs, had caught up with him.

HE COULD BE TORMENTED AND AGGRESSIVE ON STAGE, but people who knew Lenny Bruce referred to him as gentle and compassionate. “Lenny was very easy-going, good-natured, never got excited, never got angry,” said his mother in 1989. “He always wanted to see things nice.”

women, including the film star Faye Dunaway. Even during his five-year marriage to the woman he always proclaimed to be the love of his life, a beautiful, red-haired stripper called Hot Honey Harlow – who he described in his autobiography as “a composite of the Virgin Mary and a \$500-a-night whore” – he was active in the Los Angeles swingers and orgy scene.

He was also hugely compulsive and self-destructive. The jazz life he so readily adopted in the Fifties was steeped in drugs, and Bruce was more devoted than most. As well as amphetamines and hallucinogens, he was soon hooked on heroin. For most of the decade from the mid-Fifties to his death, aged 40, in 1966 from a morphine overdose, he was an obsessive junkie with a runaway habit; at one point in 1959 he was spending \$600 a week, the equivalent today of many thousands of dollars.

His drug addiction led to financial losses, illness, reckless behaviour, police and FBI surveillance and, most damagingly for his career, arrests and convictions. He was busted for drug possession in Philadelphia in 1961 and again in Los Angeles a year later, and faced the possibility of a 10-year jail sentence. Declared an addict, however, he was sentenced to confinement at a state rehabilitation centre, which he avoided by making repeated appeals.

It was a criminal conviction, though, and it would have been the end of his career – if he wasn't already fighting to clear his name on other charges of “appealing to prurient interests” and “performing a lewd show”.

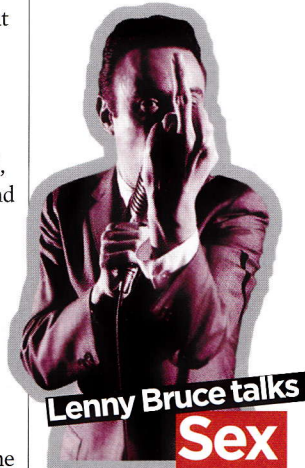
“TO” AND “COME”, AS USED IN THE ROUTINE BELOW, WERE NOT THE ONLY WORDS TO BRING LENNY BRUCE INTO CONFLICT WITH THE US AUTHORITIES. “Cocksucker”, “motherfucker”, even “schmuck” were

also considered in violation of obscenity laws, as was mocking the Pope

(especially in Catholic Chicago) and ridiculing Jackie Kennedy soon after her husband, JFK, was shot dead.

From 1961 on, Bruce faced numerous long-running and costly court cases, most of them absurd in nature and unconstitutional in law. His many supporters in the media, arts and academia rallied to his defence. University professors made analogies in court between his language and content and the work of Aristophanes, Chaucer, Joyce and Dostoevsky. There were learned if bitterly contested debates about semantics, social value and artistic freedom. Allen Ginsberg drew up a petition, signed by such luminaries as Woody Allen, Bob Dylan, Norman Mailer, Paul Newman, John Updike and Robert Rauschenberg, which declared Lenny Bruce a social satirist “in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais and Twain”. Fans started wearing “Lay off Lenny Bruce” badges and chanting “We love Lenny! We're Lenny's people!” at his shows.

Yet he was often his own worst enemy. He became consumed by the charges brought against him and convinced he was being persecuted. He began to study law, fired numerous leading lawyers, and often, disastrously, represented himself. He began to look less alienated than deranged. It became increasingly difficult for him to find work, as club-owners were often threatened or afraid that they would >



Lenny Bruce talks **Sex**

Part singing, crooning, rapping, chanting, shouting and talking, and accompanying himself on snare drum and cymbal...

To is a preposition.

Come is verb.

To is a preposition.

Come is a verb, the verb intransitive.

To come.

To come.

I've heard these two words my whole adult life, and as a kid when I thought I was sleeping.

Toooooo commmmme.

It's been like a big drum solo.

Did you come?

Did you come?

Good.

Did you come good?

Did you come good?

Recitative! I come better with you, sweetheart, than anyone in the whole god-damned world...

I really came so good.

So good.

But don't come in me.

Don't come in me, me, me, me, me.

Don't come in me, me, me...



Lenny Bruce
One-liners

Lenny Bruce's performances were seamless streams-of-consciousness that would often last for two hours or more. All the same, he came up with the occasional candid quip...

If Jesus had been killed 20 years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.

Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God.

We say we love our mothers, yet when any foul imagery is needed they are always intimately involved.

The only dog with a function is a Doberman pinscher. You raise him, train him, and 10 years later he kills you.

For tax purposes I've just formed a new company - it's called 4Q2.

We Jews killed Christ, and if he comes back, we'll kill him again.

Controversy makes money.

about the world's filthiest joke. "Eminem is the pardon of Lenny Bruce."

In the US, comics such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Sam Kinison, Denis Leary, Chris Rock, Jon Stewart, Michael Moore, and the makers of *South Park* have all benefited and taken inspiration from Lenny Bruce's bravery, integrity and honesty. One of his more direct descendants was Bill Hicks, a daring and provocative comic who criticised the first Gulf War in 1991, was censored on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and who died, aged 33, of cancer in 1994.

His legacy has also pervaded the work of many British comedians: Peter Cook and Dudley Moore's scatological "Derek and Clive" routines in the Sixties; Monty Python in the Seventies with their TV series and film *The Life of Brian*; the Comedy Store stand-ups and improvisers who sparked the alternative comedy boom in the Eighties also owed a debt to him, whether they knew it or not, as did *Father Ted*, the agitprop comedy of Mark Thomas, and the biting satire of Chris Morris.

His name tends to come up whenever the issues of free speech, satire and censorship are debated. In the US, he has become a constitutional First Amendment martyr, cited in cases involving rap artists, photographers, civil-liberty campaigners and pornographer Larry Flynt. In a world in which obscenity and censorship are back on the agenda - from the Dixie Chicks' lambasting of Texan George Bush, to the furore over the BBC's screening of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, Janet Jackson's flashing boob and Danish cartoons - he seems curiously relevant to our often po-faced and PC times.

lose their licences if they booked him; he got deep into debt.

Worst of all, his life, as always, spilt over into his performances. Whereas once his shows were clever and revelatory, they were now didactic, sermonising, self-obsessed. Lenny Bruce was often boring and, worst of all, unfunny. One night, at the end of a self-indulgent show during which he spoke almost entirely about his arrests and court appearances, he signed off with a line that was to become almost as famous as his celebrated skits. "I wasn't very funny tonight," he apologised. "Sometimes I'm not. I'm not a comedian. I'm Lenny Bruce."

THIS SUMMER SEES THE FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF LENNY BRUCE'S DEATH, yet his influence on the comedians and stand-ups who have followed cannot be overstated. Many consider him the godfather of alternative comedy, although Eddie Izzard, who portrayed Lenny Bruce on stage in London in 1999, goes further: "He is the Jesus Christ of stand-up comedy," he says.

After Lenny, entertainers' tongues were considerably looser and their minds significantly freer. "His audacity as a performer, the brilliance of his best work, and his intrepid spirit helped liberate American entertainment and cleared the way for the insurgents and upstarts who followed," says Penn Jillette of magic/comedy duo Penn & Teller and co-creator of *The Aristocrats*, a 2005 documentary film

The Playboys



Hugh Hefner was one of Lenny Bruce's greatest supporters. He printed the first major profile of him in *Playboy*, made him a guest on the first show of his TV series *Playboy's Penthouse* (above) and published his autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*. Here he tells *Esquire* about their relationship

I first met Lenny in San Francisco in 1958. I'd heard a lot about him and I specifically went there to see his act. It was certainly controversial. It was like a freeform verbal assault on traditional values, but hugely funny. That's a point that's often lost in the Lenny Bruce story - he was hilarious.

I saw him many times afterwards and the objections and charges

that were brought against him were essentially bullshit. The act had an edge to it, but it was not dirty. What made him controversial was what he had to say about society's hypocrisies, about race and religion, and the questions he raised about the Catholic Church. He wasn't a sick comic; he was simply commenting on a sick society.

Lenny was special to me; he became a close friend. Sure, he had drug problems and he could be self-destructive, but his heart was pure. He was a kind of innocent and generous, kind-hearted. There was a vulnerability to him that people responded to and that was there in his act.

The girls certainly liked him. When he was young he was very handsome and attractive, and even in the latter years he had the same kind of charismatic bad boy appeal that a jazz musician or rock star has. He was like the Mick Jagger or Miles Davis of comedy.

The seeds of the dramatic social-sexual changes that took place in the America and England in the Sixties were sewn a decade earlier in the ultra-conservative Fifties by such forces as rock'n'roll, *Playboy* - and Lenny Bruce.

They [the authorities] really went after him, hounding him and grounding him and making it increasingly difficult for him to work, and it killed him. But he embodied important ideas of free speech and individual freedom in his work, of standing up to censorship. I only wish he had lived to see the social and political changes he helped bring about, and the positive impact that he had on the world.

Maybe that's why in 2003 Lenny Bruce was granted the first ever posthumous pardon in the history of New York State for his obscenity conviction. "This is a declaration of New York's commitment to upholding the First Amendment," said Governor George Pataki. "Freedom of speech is one of the greatest American liberties, and I hope this pardon serves as a reminder of the precious freedoms we are fighting to preserve as we continue to wage the war on terror."

Lenny Bruce would no doubt have seen through such bald-faced hypocrisy and political opportunism, and turned it into a comedy routine. It seems appropriate, then, to give this inveterate talker and mould-breaker the last word. "And so, because I love you," he would often say at the end of a performance, "fuck you and good night." 🗨️