



## BICENTENNIAL JIVE

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With the film *Silverstreak*, Richard Pryor is probably the hottest Black comedian in the country. Last fall he signed a three-million-dollar, four-year contract with Universal Studios—with a written stipulation that he can say, do, and write *anything* he wants. In the past three years, he's received an Emmy Award, the American Writers' Guild Award, and the American Academy of Humor Award and has been the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine profiles.

Yet just seven years ago, Pryor had a breakdown on-stage at the Al Alladin Hotel in Las Vegas. He later explained that he felt too restricted by the tastes of a white nightclub audience; he felt the current of characters inside his head but couldn't "go" with them. Three years later, in 1973, he reappeared as the piano man in *Lady Sings The Blues*; after that, he began making nightclub appearances again, cut records, wrote for Flip Wilson, Norman Lear, Lily Tomlin, Mel Brooks, and starred in more films. A comic *enfant terrible*, he is like Harold Lloyd as he hangs precariously over the edge of convention and knows he cannot fall.

What happened? What changes in the political/cultural climate have occurred in the last seven years to

give a black comedian such free rein over his material? And further, even beyond what *caused* these changes, can we look at his comedy—any comedy—critically? Doesn't comedy, by its very nature, give scrutiny the slip?

To answer these questions, we must go back to the beginnings of the modern black comedians. In 1961, Dick Gregory began in clubs as a topical, integrationist comic. As the civil rights movement grew, he transformed his act from a comedy of interior outrage into a public outcry that not only caught more ears, but dialectically built the movement along with his career. Other comics followed him: among them, Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge.

The assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 marked the end of the non-violent integrationist phase of the civil rights movement. Amidst riots, militant black separatist groups, and police repression, there was little room for humor. The situation was too tense for comedians to comment on racism with their characteristic irony and understatement. Fewer black comedians appeared in clubs or on TV. Cambridge stopped making albums and began starring in third-rate movies. Cosby toned down his already low-key act; and

Gregory became involved in macrobiotics and numerology, went on hunger strikes to protest the war, wrote books, and generally diluted discussion of race relations.

Times change. As we've been told *ad nauseum*, the 70s saw an end to 60s-type political upheaval. And then, with Watergate, satire had a national renaissance. Americans saw their president turn into a liar before their very eyes. The result: instant cynicism and mistrust of politicians and businessmen. Jules Feiffer, Gary Trudeau, and Walt Kelley had great days every day. Gregory came into prominence again and gave spirited and witty speeches denouncing the 60s' assassinations and the CIA.

But along with the joy of exposing a regime's dirty linen comes the disgust. The twin usurpers, Ford and Rockefeller, took over with little resistance. The national mood became so low that in the last elections a voter turnout of 55 percent was considered good. Cynicism, along with its cultural half-brother, irreverence, were not *faits accomplis*.

Around this time, Pryor appeared and recorded the million-seller album "That Nigger's Crazy" (1974). Pryor had a field day with his newfound freedom to say anything that popped into his head: he embraced

the impiety of the age as he lampooned racist cops, white businessmen, corrupt politicians, and hypocritical ministers. Brought up in Peoria whorehouses and on the street, Pryor simply began cranking out what he'd seen. He didn't have to fabricate; baring contradictions was nearly autonomic for him onstage. In a society upholstered with contradictions, racism among the most stark, the path for this young upstart was clear: straight ahead.

**B**lacks have always liked Pryor because he speaks their language. Gregory did this to an extent, but more often he opted for the cause rather than tell stories. Godfrey Cambridge and Bill Cosby, as the first casualties of cultural tokenism, generally minimized their ethnic backgrounds: they bleached their accents, cleaned up their jokes, and filed down their raw edges. They were allowed to tell a few things about their early days, but not too much. Pryor, on the other hand, tells his audience minute details about his personal life. Blacks love this because there doesn't seem to be any part of this man's life (and, consequently their own) that escapes his narrative.

V. Meyerhold, in an essay on Chaplin, states: "We must discover the mask which is closest to us and closest to the people for whom the work is intended. Once that is accomplished, three strings are set vibrating by the magic of comedy: laughter, pity, and terror." Pryor has found his masks: they are the people he's known all his life.

His characters are far more complex than Cambridge's characters. Compare Pryor's "old man" character, Mudbone (from "That Nigger's Crazy," 1974), with Cambridge's modern Tom, Arthur Uncle (from "Them Cotton Pickin' Days is Over," 1964). Mudbone casually recalls the distrust among white and black troops during World War II: a black soldier he knew refused to put on his gas mask ("Thought damn white folks were trying to trick him! Nigger got mustard gas wounds all over his face!"). Another time, in Hollywood, Mudbone tries out for *King Kong*,

but ends up mauling the director when he discovers that King Kong is actually an ape, not a black king.\* On the other hand, Cambridge's Arthur Uncle deals with racial questions quite differently. Arthur and his antitheses, some young black activist actors, lock horns on the question of how to deal with the white director's racism. Arthur tells them not to be too militant, not to make "massa" uncomfortable. If they do as he tells them, he'll get them parts in *Porgy and Bess*—when it's revived. The white director suddenly interrupts and offers him a part for "the only Negro that fought on the side of the South." Arthur grabs the part, but feels guilty. When the young blacks don't respond to his apologies, he storms offstage shouting, "Well, I'm gonna make more money than you!" Listening to this bit on record, one feels that these people are more viewpoint than character. The black militants never speak; they act as a silent immovable block rather than as complex people with doubts as well as convictions. Arthur is funny, but one belittles him by laughing at him. Mudbone, however, is a more complicated character. He not only plows into white opposition, but also ignores it when he feels like it. He enjoys walking down the street with his pal who "can fart Yankee Doodle"; he plays tricks on both whites and blacks; he likes to watch (and to start) fights; he sits in the sun and lives grandly on his \$40-a-month pension for having worked 35 years. Pryor makes him so real that he draws cheers whenever he starts a Mudbone skit.

He explains:

*There's a kind of unity here. In different cities, wherever I am, niggers be laughing at the same shit, so I know we all know what's happening.*

Because Pryor expands so much on the emotional lives of his charac-

\* Pryor may have gotten this item from an account of Dino DeLaurentis' screentests for the remake of *King Kong*. He requested a "heavyset black man" for Kong's understudy. Dino didn't get his man, because of black protest.

ters, they are beyond the pure negativity of satire. He is, in fact, concerned with positive black images. He does a bit that deals with current media portrayals of blacks:

*I love movies that have niggers in them, but you all see Logan's Run, about the future? There ain't no niggers in it! White folks ain't planning for us to be around! That's why we gotta make movies, but really hip movies; we done made enough movies about pimps. . . .*

How do whites feel about Pryor? How can they laugh at skits like the following?

*Cops pull over a white man. "Yes officer, is there anything I can do to help?" No problem. Then a black man. "I am reaching into my pocket for my license, cause I don't wanna be no mother-fucking accident!" Why it's a wonder niggers don't go mad! Cop pulls him over on the way to a date. "Get out of the car! There was a robbery! Nigger looks just like you! Now put your hands up, take your pants down, and spread your cheeks!" What nigger feels like having fun after that? White folks. . . they don't understand. "Police brutality, nonsense! Why those people were resisting arrest!"*

But whites do understand, and it's at least partly because of Pryor that they do. When Gregory wrote that "comedy is friendly relations," he meant that it can often break down hostilities that rhetoric and logic cannot. By loosening white guilt through laughter, Pryor purges whites and makes them want to understand. Most of white America is certainly ready. Two of the most compelling TV specials of recent years, "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" and "Roots" attracted more white viewers than a whole season of cop shows.

The above cop skit relates to whites on other levels. As the standard of living deteriorates through rising inflation and unemployment, more *nouveau* poor whites stand in unemployment lines and experience police harassment, threat of eviction, etc, on a level previously reserved for blacks. As George Carlin said,

"We're all Nixon's niggers now." Aided by comedy, sympathy moves towards empathy.

Pryor's skits and movie parts also attract whites because of their *five*: their manipulations of an increasingly harsh world, their picaresque realism. Whites are beginning to lose some of the illusions that blacks never had a chance to have. In *Silverstreak*, when Gene Wilder gets carried away in a shootout with the villains in a boxcar, Pryor screams, "What the hell are you doing? This ain't a Western! Let's haul ass!"

So, softened with laughter, whites in the audience will accept almost anything from Pryor. They will prowl with Mudbone through the ghetto on encounters with drunks and addicts or hear their own (and even better, their parents') sexual habits lampooned.

**P**ryor is the direct heir of cultural pioneers such as Redd Foxx and Pigmeat Markham, Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl; he is also in the middle of an era that spawned *Hair*, *Deep Throat*, and *The Joy of Sex*. He absorbs all of this and goes on to explore the sexual attitudes of different races, classes, and even epochs.

*When I was a teenager in the 50s, you never got no pussy... your dick'd get harder than times in '29, nuts coming up to your throat. Whew!... Then someday your father'd take you aside and say, "Boy, don't you ever kiss no pussy." I couldn't wait to kiss pussy. He'd been wrong about everything else!*

When Pryor's sex-related ramblings become social criticism, the entire audience (not only men), laughs deeply, almost painfully. He finds a racial and class hook in sexuality: middle-class whites are repressed ("Think we'll be having sexual intercourse tonight my darling? We're not? Oh, what the heck."); blacks, according to Pryor, get right to it. ("Niggers make noise when they make love. They ain't quiet. They go, 'Oh you motherfucker! Oh goddam, baby!'")

Along with the sexual satire in Pryor's comedy, one finds an almost

complete alienation from women. They are his most one-dimensional characters, either shrewishly aggressive (if black) or totally subservient (if white). A typical Pryor woman is referred to only as bitch or pussy: she hassles her man if he comes home drunk, nags him for not working, and "kicks ass" in domestic fights. Yet Pryor gets away with this in front of audiences that would boo the tired sexism of Bob Hope and Henny Youngman ("Now take my wife... please.") off the stage. How? Pryor



plays a Groucho Marx figure: rascal, anarchist, and (in Mel Brooks' words) "man of *outré* imagination." Groucho's sexism is ignored because other elements dominate his films: attacks on pomposity, outrageous word games, crazy incidents, weird characters. Sexism got buried in a cascade of complex, rapid-fire, assault-on-all-levels humor.

What makes Pryor's humor seem genuine at all times is that he takes examples from real life: there are women who are nagging, annoying, scatter-brained. But here his comic aesthetics fail him. Realism shouldn't aimlessly abstract examples out of daily life. Whenever it does, the audience sees this abstraction as

generalized truth. The media does the same thing: for example, it focuses on "welfare cheats" instead of corporate injustice, thereby creating the "welfare cadillac" myth.

Richer characterizations would result if Pryor recognized the basic contradictions of his time—social, moral, spiritual—and infused them into situations where they clashed and resolved themselves comically. Excellent bits could then be built around the hassles a black woman faces in government agencies, the myths she encounters in the media, or the pain she feels from a stubborn lover. It's not even necessary she fully understand the complex interplays occurring. What's important is that the audience catch it.

An apolitical but populist comedian like Pryor can expose contradictions, but not explain them, as Chaplin could. I personally can't come down too hard on him. Contradictions exist in any performer (and in the audience as well), and often he or she is the last to resolve them. In all the collected material written, filmed, and recorded by or about Pryor, I've found no political "positions," no signed petitions, no issue-oriented talk shows. The closest that he comes to a political statement is the last cut on his "Bicentennial Nigger" album (1976). (This bit is accompanied by "The Star Spangled Banner.")

*I'm so glad you white folks took me out of Dahomey. I used to live to be 150, now I die of high blood pressure at 52 (yuk, yuk). That thrills me to death... I don't know what to do about 200 more years of this. Lord ha' mercy. Yessiree. I don't know where my old mama is now. She up yonder with them big white folks in the sky. You all probably done forgot about it. (Music stops, accent disappears, voice lowers.) But I ain't gonna never forget it.*

Most comedy albums end with applause. This one does not. As a result, Pryor's chilling last words remain with us. □

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