The subversive comic

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER and PATRICK BURNS, Special to the Star Tribune
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"The future seems so precarious," "Professor" Irwin Corey, the madcap monologist, said in the 1960s, that "people are willing to abandon themselves to chaos. The new comic reflects this."

Among the new generation of satirists, none was funnier -- or more subversive -- than George Carlin. At his death in June 2008, he was acclaimed, almost universally, as a comic genius and counterculture hero.

In "7 Dirty Words," James Sullivan, the former pop music and culture critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, traces the arc of Carlin's career, from his buttoned-down beginnings, performing in venues like Angie's Roman Numeral Restaurant in Batavia, N.Y., to the in-your-face '60s and '70s, when he struggled with censorship and drugs, to his rebirth in the 1990s as an elder statesman. Leaving ample time, God bless him, to quote Carlin's most memorable one-liners, Sullivan celebrates the native New Yorker as a "natural born transgressor" who challenged a society "inundated with evasions, false promises, phony manners, fine print and outright lies."

Carlin's enduring contribution to American culture, Sullivan reminds us, was in demonstrating that language was often used as a form of social control. His routine, "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television," which led to his arrest after a performance in Milwaukee in 1972 and made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, rendered "the verboten suitably ridiculous." The "heavy seven," Carlin was wont to say, would "affect your soul, curve your spine, and keep the country from winning the war."

Unlike Lenny Bruce, Sullivan points out perceptively, Carlin adopted a tone that was more playful than confrontational, which may explain why he became the first entertainer to make language the centerpiece of his persona and flourish professionally.

During his last two decades, Sullivan acknowledges, as Carlin raged against the dying of the light, his comedy turned from blue to black. But "7 Dirty Words" doesn't fully capture the texture -- and intensity -- of the change. Nor does it account for Carlin's growing alienation and contempt for his audiences, young and old.

Sullivan does not mention, for example, that Carlin proposed a holiday celebrating "the raw visceral hatred that is felt every hour in the day by ordinary people." Or his predilection to find suicide "interesting as hell." Or his hope that Mickey Mouse would eat some tainted cheese and die, lonely and forgotten.

Great comedians bend the rules, James Sullivan reminds us, and question everything. George Carlin surely was a great comedian. For better and worse, he never wanted to rest in peace.
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