George Carlin's Last Interview

By Jay Dixit on June 23, 2008

Ten days ago, on Friday, June 13th, 2008, I had the extraordinary privilege of talking to George Carlin. As far as I know it was the last in-depth interview he gave before he passed away yesterday at age 71...

He spoke about the pride he took in his work. As a ninth-grade dropout, he said, it was gratifying to see his words quoted in textbooks, classrooms, and courtrooms. And he was proud to have inspired other comedy greats, who routinely called him to say, "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be doing this." As he looked back on his astonishingly prolific 50-year career—which includes 130 Tonight Show appearances, 23 albums, 14 HBO specials, three books, and one Supreme Court case—the interview became a sort of retrospective of his life…

It would be impossible to overstate George Carlin’s contribution to standup comedy. Along with Richard Pryor and a few others, he essentially created the genre as we know it today. But he was more than just a comedy pioneer. He was a freethinker who never backed down, and he truly changed the course of American culture. He will be missed.

The Interview (A few excerpts)

Do you go around observing and trying to collect funny things? Or do you just live your life and then say how you feel about what you happen to have seen?

I’m 71, and I’ve been doing this for a little over 50 years, doing it at a fairly visible level for 40. By this time it’s all second nature. It’s all a machine that works a certain way: the observations, the immediate evaluation of the observation, and then the mental filing of it, or writing it down on a piece of paper. I’ve often described the way a 20-year-old versus, say, a 60- or a 70-year-old, the way it works. A 20-year-old has a limited amount of data they’ve experienced, either seeing or listening to the world. At 70 it’s a much richer storage area, the matrix inside is more textured, and has more contours to it. So, observations made by a 20-year-old are compared against a data set that is incomplete. Observations made by a 60-year-old are compared against a much richer data set. And the observations have more resonance, they’re richer…

Now at my age, I have a network of knowledge and data and observations and feelings and values and evaluations I have in me that do things automatically. And then when I sit down to consciously write, that's when I bring the craftsmanship. That's when I pull everything together and say, how I can best express that? And then as you write, you find more, 'cause the mind is looking for further connections. And these things just flow into your head and you write them. And the writing is the really wonderful part. A lot of this is discovery. A lot of things are lying around waiting to be discovered and that's our job is to just notice them and bring them to life…
You talked about how wonderful it is, this feeling of writing. So what is your process like?

I take a lot of single-page notes, little memo pad notes. I make a lot of notes on those things. For when I'm not near a little memo pad, I have a digital recorder. Most of the note-taking happens while I’m watching television.

Because the world is undifferentiated on the television set. You may be watching the news channel, but it’s going to cover the breadth of American life and the human experience. It's going to go from suicide bombings to frivolous consumer goods. It's a broad window on the world, and a lot of things are already established in my mind as things I say, things that I'm interested in, things that are fodder for my machine. And when I see something that relates to one of them, I know it instantly and if it's a further exaggeration and a further addition, or an exception—if it plays into furthering my purpose, I jot it down.

When I harvest the pieces of paper and I go through them and sort them, the one lucky thing I got in my genetic package was a great methodical left brain. I have a very orderly mind that wants to classify and index things and label them and store them according to that. I had a boss in radio when I was 18 years old, and my boss told me to write down every idea I get even if I can't use it at the time, and then file it away and have a system for filing it away—because a good idea is of no use to you unless you can find it. And that stuck with me.

Can you remember the first joke you ever told?

No. But I do remember the first time I ever made my mother laugh. And unfortunately, it’s lost on me what it was I said. But I noticed the moment, I knew something had happened, this was when I was very young. My mother laughed fairly frequently. But I knew the difference between her social laugh and her really spontaneous laugh when she was caught off guard—which is the key to laughter, being off guard. And I said something to her, and I saw that in her and it registered with me. And it made the point. I wouldn’t have remembered it as well as I do if it hadn’t meant a lot to me. It was a kind of a little mark along the way, a little badge of honor. It meant I had said something witty. I didn’t clown, I wasn’t making a face or standing in a funny angle. I had said something witty. I had probably turned some situation around, exaggerated one element, and made a joke.

Discussion Questions

1. How did George Carlin remember things he observed? (Relate it to what we’ve talked about this week.)

2. What quote(s) are proof that he recognized that memory builds over time?

3. How does writing his routines help bring all these memories together?

4. He remembers the first time he ever made his mom laugh. Why?