



# QUEENS of COMEDY

Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller,  
Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers,  
and the New Generation  
of Funny Women

Susan Horowitz

# *Queens of Comedy*

## **Studies in Humor and Gender**

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A series edited by Regina Barreca, *University of Connecticut, Storrs*, and Nancy Walker, *Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee*

Volume 1

### **Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy**

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Volume 2

### **Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women**

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Humor as a human activity crosses—and double-crosses—many lines and boundaries, including those of gender. *Studies in Humor and Gender* will explore these boundaries and the territories encompassed by them. The monographs and collections published in this series will provide useful and original perspectives on the interaction of gender and humor in many of their possible combinations. An interdisciplinary field by its very nature, the study of humor, comedy, joking, and play draws together the interests and expertise of those working in literature, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, communication, film studies, folklore, medicine, and, increasingly, gender studies. The works published under the aegis of *Studies in Humor and Gender* will offer scholars, writers, and general readers alike a forum for examining and discussing insights into a vital field of study.

By making available the best discoveries and theories about humor and comedy in books framed by issues of gender, we believe that this series will inevitably also shed light on the larger questions of culture, power, sexuality, and the imagination. Its texts will feature sound scholarship, integrative approaches to the study of humor and gender, and clear, lively prose. We have no doubt that the volumes published in *Studies in Humor and Gender* will generate interest, debate, dissent, recognition, and attention. Destined for personal bookshelves as well as libraries, these volumes will be widely read, consulted, quoted, and discussed both inside and outside classroom walls.



# PREFACE

Why write a book about women and comedy? Isn't categorizing comedians by gender like classifying kisses by technique? The analysis diminishes the entertainment value.

Shouldn't we ask: is she funny? Not: is she feminine?

In fact, many comediennes describe comedy as "sexless." Some consider their chief mentors to be men. (Phyllis Diller was influenced by Bob Hope; Joan Rivers, by Lenny Bruce.) Some even describe comedy as "masculine"—this in spite of the fact that they are in the process of creating and performing it—sans penis.

A case can, and has been, made for considering comedy without reference to sex. Many books and articles have been written about comedy in general. However, I believe that exploring the art and lives of comediennes as women is valid. And more than valid. The art and lives of these gifted performers tell us a great deal about our own lives and the changing role of women in society.

A few facts:

1. Among many anthologies and studies of comedians, women are significantly missing or minimized. The norm is not neutral. It is male.

2. In the performing arts (music, dance, acting) the only profession where an overwhelming majority of performers are men is stand-up comedy. This partly, though not entirely, accounts for the focus of general anthologies and studies. The only show business profession where women significantly outnumber the men is stripping. (Some female jokesters combine comedy and stripping in routines like: "On my honeymoon, I wore a peekaboo blouse. My husband peeked and booed!" [Phyllis Diller] Or, as another comic remarked: "I know how to make men gay: I take my clothes off!")

However, despite barriers of macho tradition, women today form an exploding minority in the comedy field. Where they were once below 1% of stand-up comics, women are now 15–20% of the profession. And they are influential beyond their numbers. Unlike comedy clubs, which are male-dominated, situation comedies, with their vast entrée into tens of millions of homes, are female dominated (from *I Love Lucy* to *Mary Tyler Moore* to *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire* and *Ellen*). Most stand-up comics are eager to make the transition to the lucrative world of situation comedy. Stand-up comedy regularly provides television with performers. Many of these stars are women whose situation comedy characters are based on their own lives.

3. Most of us have noticed that in a mixed social situation, it is men who tell the jokes—particularly the raunchy ones. Women are

expected to laugh—though not the longest and hardest (especially at the raunchy ones), and not to top the men's jokes. One such activity I attended was termed (not-so-coincidentally) a "joke-off!"

On the other hand, most of us have witty female friends and family members. Funny women who have the talent and drive for performing careers achieve mass followings (and the fortunes that accompany their fame) by defying gender roles—doing physical, slapstick comedy (Lucille Ball), presenting themselves as homely tomboys (Carol Burnett), taking charge in comedy clubs (Phyllis Diller), or basing their act on intimate details of their own lives (Joan Rivers).

But no matter what success they achieve, comediennes have to deal with the conflict between a woman's prescribed role in society and her own personality, talent, and inclination. Female singers, dancers, and actresses pose few conflicts to their audience. Their talents enhance their attractiveness as women. Professionalizing their gifts might create the usual tensions between career and home life. But the simple expression of their talents doesn't make anyone call them unfeminine. Comedy does.

The growing presence of women in comedy shifts the definition of feminine from object (Henny Youngman's: "Take my wife, please!") to subject (Joy Behar's: "I want a man in my life, but not in my house. I want him to come in, fix the VCR, and leave!"). It's hard to keep women in their place as passive sex/domestic objects when they've just been actively using their life experience and opinions to get laughs.

Is there a contradiction between being feminine and being funny? Is there such a thing as a feminine style of humor? This book will explore these questions and others—such as the relation of the public personality of famous funny women to their private lives and to women's role in society.

For now, let me conclude by answering a very human question that I am often asked. When people find out that in the course of writing this book I interviewed Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, and Joan Rivers, they often ask: "What are they like in person?" And a funny thing comes to mind. Besides their obvious professionalism, they are still nurturing women. Maybe I looked skinny, or hungry, or whatever, but Lucille Ball pulled me in dripping wet from a rainstorm and gave me tea and cookies; Carol Burnett treated me to a substantial lunch; Phyllis Diller insisted on my taking home a huge fruit basket; and Joan Rivers made me scrambled eggs and toast.

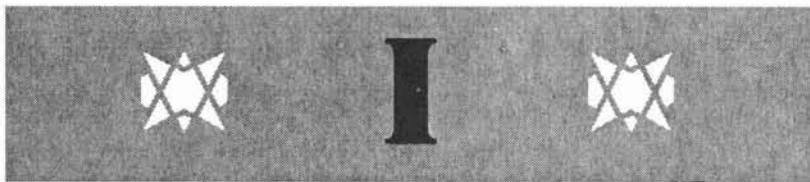
In the course of researching and writing this book, I have become a fuller human being. And I hope that in the course of reading it, so will you.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Without you, I couldn't share a laugh  
Without you, I'd miss my other half  
I'd feel so alone  
I'd lose my funny bone  
'Cause comedy's not something that you do all on your own  
Without you, my spirits couldn't rise  
My laughter is shining in your eyes  
'Cause comedy takes two, it isn't something I could do  
Without you.





## *Comic Appeal, Sex Appeal, and Power*

The black and white television screen leaves the Jack-o-lantern orange hair to our imagination. But the pinned-up curls, saucer-sized eyes, silly putty mouth, and quavering “Ricky-y-y!” leave no doubt about who this is...and where we have tuned our television dial. Forty-plus years later, we still love Lucy.

Blue-gray smoke wafts past the two-drink-minimum cocktail glasses toward a wooden cigarette held by a skinny woman in a satin evening suit and frightwig. Her own explosive “Ah Ha-Ha-Ha!” jump-starts an echo of raucous laughter in the enormous nightclub. “Go Phyllis!” cheers a man in the audience—and Phyllis Diller punches home her next joke.

A Roman empress becomes a coughing co-ed, who turns into a Texas housewife, who metamorphoses into a wistful charlady, who sweeps up a fading spotlight as the final credits roll on the television screen. The hour-long variety show is over. The dozens of sketch characters have vanished—or been reborn in comic bits and pathetic shadings that color the full length roles created by...Carol Burnett.

“Can we *talk!*?” caws the thin, birdlike woman in the designer gown as her eagle eyes calibrate the carats on the engagement rings in the front row. Laughing hoarsely, Joan Rivers confides the latest dish—celebrity scandals, her most recent plastic surgery, or the secret of her success—real jewelry, fake orgasms.

Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, and Joan Rivers are Queens of Comedy. Each created a career that lasted over a quarter of a century. Each put her own twist on traditional female comic types and broke new ground for younger, more radical comediennes. And each is a very funny lady. For more than twenty-five years, these Queens of Comedy have been getting big laughs and big hands—winning hands, because they are in fact, top cards.

The Queen of Hearts is, of course, Lucille Ball. Her funniness and lovability charmed *I Love Lucy* fans in the 1950's and still appeals in today's syndicated re-runs. The situation comedy mixed broad farce with domestic sentimentality and fine, ensemble, comic acting. The emotional heart of the program was the love between Lucy and Ricky Ricardo (played by Desi Arnaz, Ball's husband, who produced the show). Like Ricky/Desi, millions of viewers said, "I love Lucy"—and crowned her the Queen of Hearts.

The Queen of Clubs is Phyllis Diller, who began performing in major comedy clubs and nightclubs at a time when stand-up comedy was 99% male. Diller broke down barriers against women in comedy through the sheer force of her talent and determination. At thirty-seven years old, Diller was a housewife with five children, an unemployed husband, and a gift for making women laugh at the laundromat. She embarked on a risky show business career where all the role models were male and seemingly inaccessible. She honed her talent until she developed herself into a grandmaster of comedy, writing much of her own material, playing clubs which seat thousands of people, and delivering twelve laughs per minute.

The Queen of Spades is Carol Burnett, who dug deeply into her own childhood pain (both parents were alcoholic and sporadically abusive) to create comedy that was darker and more violent than that of Lucille Ball. She broke new ground with her willingness to jump, trip, take pratfalls, mug, or do a Tarzan yell that challenged notions of ladylike behavior. Burnett has said:

If you're a woman, it's difficult to break through the barrier of having others accept you as funny. There's all that training you've had since you were three. Be a lady! Don't yell or try to be funny. Just be a nice little girl. Sit quietly with your knees close together, and speak only when you're spoken to. Women are afraid to make themselves unattractive. I'm not afraid of that, goodness knows! But all but one in a million women are afraid to mess up their hair, not wear lipstick, slouch, look flat-chested....Most women are obsessed with an out-moded sense of modesty. They labor under the necessity of being ladylike. They are afraid that being funny is unfeminine.

Burnett's willingness to challenge that feminine role-stereotyping resulted in a style of comedy that mixed broad slapstick with vulnerability and pathos. Her talent and personal likability were at the core of *The Carol Burnett Show*, one of the few prime time television variety show to be hosted by a comedienne and the most successful.

Joan Rivers is the Queen of Diamonds. Her sparkling wit and hard-edged comedy cuts through pretense with the precision of an industrial strength diamond drill. Her love of jewelry is evident in her accessories: the necklaces, bracelets, brooches, and earrings that festoon her fashionable ensembles. Jewelry is also a favorite motif in her act, for show, for fun, and as a female success symbol, especially when set into engagement rings. For years, Rivers herself was a "diamond in the rough," polishing her act in low-pay, no pay showcase clubs. She broke taboos with her comedy act, basing it on her own life and daring treatment of intimate, female-oriented subject matter. She finally broke through on *The Tonight Show*, became Johnny Carson's first permanent guest host, and went on to host her own Emmy-winning talk show.

Each of these women had to struggle against some form of prejudice. Sometimes it was simple racism (Ball's sponsors resisted casting Desi Arnaz as her television husband because they did not think audiences would accept the idea of an American woman married to a Cuban). Sometimes it was internalized sexism—a fear of appearing unladylike or "not nice." For the first seven years of *The Carol Burnett Show*, Burnett was so concerned about being perceived as overly assertive and unfeminine, that she avoided attending production meetings where the show was planned and written.

Mostly it was unsubtle reminders that women, especially female performers, were meant to be pretty—that their success depended on their looks. Burnett and Rivers were discouraged from pursuing careers as actresses because they weren't "pretty" enough. Comedy provided an alternative to the "pretty" identity. Diller made her "ugliness" the cornerstone of her comedy act, and all three made fun of their appearance and lack of sex appeal.

As female stand-up comics, Diller and Rivers met with tremendous resistance. Stand-up comedy was—and to an extent, still is—a male profession. Many male comics got their start doing comedy in strip joints—and audiences were used to equating men with humor and women with stripping. As a beginning stand up comic, Rivers was booked into a strip joint and billed as "Pepper January—Comedy with Spice." When she kept her clothes on and tried to be funny, the frustrated audience booed her off the stage, yelling "Bring on the girls!"

Audiences at strip clubs have clear—if crude—expectations from female performers. They are different from general audiences in the graphic nature of their entertainment preferences. But are they different in kind? While there are male performers who are sex symbols, there is nowhere near the emphasis on attractiveness for male actors or even tv anchormen as there is for their female counterparts. Why are there so many more female strippers than male? Why are there so few women comics? Why is it that the *only* branch of show business where men significantly outnumber the women is stand-up comedy? And, conversely, why are today's female comics, while still few compared with the males, an exploding minority? (According to Budd Friedman, owner of the famous Improvisation Comedy Club in Los Angeles, about 15% of his comics are now women and their numbers are snowballing.)

Maybe it has something to do with how men look at women—and how women see themselves. For a long time, women were just not supposed to be funny. A 1909 newspaper editorialized:

Measured by ordinary standards of humor, she is about as comical as a crutch....A woman was made to be loved and fondled. She was certainly not made to be laughed at.

This prevailing opinion led to the absurd situation of female humorists, who as Nancy Walker in her seminal book *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, notes, "were writing humor in the face of the prevailing opinion that they were not capable of what they were at that moment, doing." Deanne Stillman, co-editor of *Titters*, a 1976 collection of women's humor, wanted to be a humorist since she was a teenager, but believing that "writing funny was something girls didn't do" signed the parodies she submitted to *Mad Magazine* as "Dean." In 1988, the owner of a well-known New York comedy club opined: "Stand-up comedy is aggressive. It takes balls. Sure some women do it, but you kind of wonder about them."

In 1996, Cary Hoffman, owner of Stand-Up New York comedy club, who admits he does not hire women as often as men, said, "Stand-up comedy has a lot to do with control and power. And most men seem to exercise it more easily than women."

Even some brilliantly successful female comics are infected with a vertigo that comes from trying to strike a balance between traditional sex roles and personal inclination. Joan Rivers has said, "I don't like funny women. I don't think I'm funny. I think I'm witty." Other female comics have simply faced the fact that they made a painful, but personally inevitable choice.

Gilda Radner said, "I know I've scared many men off because of humor. I'll be funny instead of feminine. You're not likely to see me sitting at the back of a party being pretty."

Karen Babbitt, a rising stand-up comic with big blue eyes and a mane of taffy-colored hair, comments:

It's still not considered feminine to be really funny. To be successful, you have to sacrifice feminine approval for comedic approval. You have to come to a point where you don't care about getting feminine approval. My whole life I was miserable. I was always getting kicked out of class. I was not asked to the prom. I was not popular. I was infamous. It was extremely painful that I could not keep my mouth shut. Finally, when I became a comedienne, my life made sense. People say to me, "This must be the hardest thing in the world." For me, it's not. And it's not something I chose to do either. It's something that very specifically and methodically chose me.

Some comediennes have resolved the supposed conflict between funniness and femininity. Carol Burnett, stigmatized for years as a gawky "mugger," advised an audience at the Museum of Broadcasting that: "The idea that it's not feminine to clown around is old hat. Just be you." On a recent HBO special, stand-up comic Elaine Boosler dismissed the conflict with a breezy "being a lady has never been one of my goals."

What is the connection between comic appeal, sex appeal, and our notions of what is feminine? Why have so few women made it in stand-up comedy? And will this change as more "chick" comics rise up the pecking order of this cock-of-the-walk profession?

It all does seem to have something to do with power—the power of comic appeal and sex appeal. The "life of the party" is usually the center of attention; and everybody laughs longest and loudest at the boss's jokes. The ability to be a good sport and laugh at a joke, especially when it's on you, is the mark of a good subordinate. Except in formally sanctioned "roasts" (which are often censored), no one expects the boss to have to "take it."

When you make someone laugh, you get him to accept the premise of your joke, which is often the stupidity of some officially sanctioned idea, behavior, or authority. Nancy Walker, author of *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, comments:

For women to adopt this role means that they must break out of the passive, subordinate position mandated for them by centuries of patriarchal tradition and take on the power accruing to those who reveal the shams, hypocrisies, and incongruities of the dominant culture. To

be a woman and a humorist is to confront and to subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and at the same time to risk alienating those upon whom women are dependent for economic survival.

As for the motives of the jokester, at least some of them include a strong power drive. Professor Paul McGee, author of *Humor: Its Origin and Development*, asserts:

It seems clear that the need to dominate is one of the basic precursors for heightened humor development. The person in a small group or at a party who is the initiator of humor is really in control of the social situation; he gives people things that they respond to, so he's pulling the strings.

Psychologist Waleed Samaled adds:

The female stand-up comics have the same personality profile, aspirations, self-image, creative outlook, and ability as the men.

How do we feel about women pulling the strings—especially when they're attached to people's funny bones? The traditional *mata-dor*/*doormat* format dictates that just as men are supposed to be taller, richer, smarter, and more aggressive, they are supposed to be the joke tellers, while the women laugh at their jokes. Ann Beatts, comedy writer, remembers what it was like to be an adolescent in the 1950's.

Real girls weren't funny. Real girls were pretty and fluffy and could do the splits in cheerleader tryouts. Real girls didn't crack jokes. Did you ever hear Sandra Dee crack a joke? Annette Funicello didn't even laugh; she just put her hands on her hips and got mad at Ricky or Tommy or Eddie or whoever was carrying her surfboard, so that they could tell her how cute she was when she was mad.

Unlike the male comic, whose talent and drive are supported by his sex role, the female comic often finds her inner nature at war with what's expected from "a real girl" or "a real woman." When Julia Klein interviewed several female comics for a 1984 *Ms.* article, she discovered:

The women agree that stand-up comedy is, in itself, an aggressive act; making someone laugh means exerting control, even power. But a woman cannot come off as overaggressive or she will lose the audience.

Comic Carol Siskind adds: