

MI DYING

UP HERE



HEARTBREAK

*and* HIGH TIMES  
IN STAND-UP COMEDY'S

GOLDEN ERA

WILLIAM KNOEDELSEDER

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WILLIAM KNOEDELSEDER



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*Dedicated to the memory of  
Irv Letofsky and Howard Brandy,  
and to the girl of my dreams.*

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## Acknowledgments

I started doing the research for this book thirty-one years ago, when my editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, Irv Letofsky, called me into his office and said there was something happening on the local comedy club scene that had the feel of Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. He thought stand-up comedy was about to explode nationally in the hands of a new crop of young performers working at the Comedy Store and the Improvisation. He thought the *Times* should establish a comedy beat. Was I interested?

For the next two years, I had stage-side seats at the best show in show business. I was at the Comedy Store the week that Robin Williams first erupted on to the LA scene, and I spent a quiet afternoon at the beach with him in his final hours of obscurity before *Mork & Mindy* hit the air. I sat slack jawed one evening as Andy Kaufman performed his entire stage act, complete with three costume changes, for an audience of two on the patio of my house and then wanted to wrestle my eight-months-pregnant wife. I spent a surreal night on the town with Kaufman's alter ego, Tony Clifton, and was present on the set the day Clifton was fired from his guest-starring role in *Taxi* and then wrestled off the Paramount Studios lot by security guards. I met and wrote about

Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Richard Lewis before the world knew who they were. I watched the funniest people of my generation get up on stage alone and try and fail and triumph. And I laughed my ass off.

I am grateful for the help and inspiration provided by the following people: Jimmy Aleck, Dottie Archibald, Alison Arngrim, Jo Anne Astrow, Mike Binder, Steve Bluestein, Elayne Boosler, the late Bernie Brillstein, Ken Browning, Johnny Dark, Lue Deck, Tom DeLisle, the late Estelle Endler, Ellen Farley, Budd Friedman, Gallagher, Argus Hamilton, Charlie Hill, Jeff Jampol, Bill Kirchenbauer, Jay Leno, Mark Lonow, Barry and Ginny Lubetkin, Jamie Masada, Dennis McDougal, Barbara McGraw, John Mettler, the late George Miller, Judy Orbach, Susan (Evans) Richmond, Phil Alden Robinson, Brad Sanders, Ross Schafer, George Shapiro, Mitzi Shore, Wil Shriner, the late John Stewart, Susan Sweetzer, Bennett Tramer, Marsha Warfield, Ellis Weiner, Dr. Robert Winter, Ann Woody, Bob Zmuda, Brian Ann Zoccola, and Alan Zwiebel.

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## Prologue: A True Comic

They slipped into the nightclub quietly, one by one, stepping carefully at first as their eyes adjusted from the bright afternoon light outside: a soft parade of mostly middle-aged comics come to pay their respects to a fallen comrade.

George Miller had died the week before from complications due to a blood clot in his brain. He was sixty-one and had battled leukemia for seven years. An obit in the *Los Angeles Times* summed up his career with the headline “Stand-up Comedian Was Often on ‘Letterman.’”

In fact, Miller had appeared as David Letterman’s guest fifty-six times over two decades. That may not sound like a lot to a layperson, but professional comedians considered it a feat of Barry Bondsian proportion. No other comic could boast such a record. Miller also had logged thirty-two appearances on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. It hadn’t made him rich or particularly famous, but it had kept him working longer than many of his comedy peers—performing in small clubs around the country, occasionally opening in Las Vegas for middle-of-the-road music acts, making a living by making people laugh. Miller had stood alone in

front of a crowd and cracked wise most every night for more than thirty years. That's not an easy thing to do.

So, on Sunday, March 16, 2003, his friends turned out to honor him at the Laugh Factory on Sunset Strip, where Miller had appeared regularly in recent years. Their names and faces ranged from vaguely familiar to instantly recognizable. Among them were Richard Lewis, the perpetually angst-ridden comic who appears regularly on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; Tom Dreesen, a veteran of sixty-one *Tonight Show* appearances and Frank Sinatra's longtime opening act; Mike Binder, the comic turned filmmaker who created, wrote, directed, and starred in the HBO series *The Mind of the Married Man*; Elayne Boosler, the comedienne credited by her colleagues with breaking down the gender barriers for her generation of female stand-up comics; the ubiquitous Jay Leno, arguably the most successful stand-up of their generation; and Mort Sahl, an elder hero to every performer in the room and, as Master of Ceremonies Dreesen noted, "the only comic George ever paid to see."

Letterman was a notable no-show. He was hospitalized in New York with a case of shingles, and all present took his absence as a sign of just how sick he really was. Dave and George had been best friends since 1977, when they both lived in the same apartment building across the street from the Comedy Store, just a few blocks down the street. Dave had paid for all of George's medical expenses during the last few years of his life and had even picked up the cost of a two-bedroom apartment and a twenty-four-hour on-call nurse. When it appeared that George was dying in 2000, Dave got him admitted to an experimental leukemia treatment program at UCLA by donating nearly \$1 million to the medical center. The treatment involved a new "miracle" drug called Gleevec that stabilized George's white blood cell count and saved his life, at least for a time.

In a way, it was probably a good thing that Letterman didn't make it to the memorial, given that Leno did. The tension of

having them both in the same room might have proved a major distraction. Once good friends, they'd had a famous falling out in 1991, when NBC chose Leno over Letterman to succeed Johnny Carson as host of *The Tonight Show*, and time had not healed the wound. Neither man ever talked publicly about the rift, but their mutual friends in the room knew both sides by heart:

Leno expressed bewilderment that Letterman blamed him for the fact that NBC offered him the gig after deciding—for whatever reasons—that Dave wasn't right for it. That's the way the showbiz cookie crumbled, he figured; it was all in the game. What was he supposed to do, turn down the opportunity of a lifetime?

The way Letterman saw it: yes. Dave thought their sixteen-year friendship should have precluded Jay from lobbying for, and making a secret deal to take over, the show that he himself had always dreamed of inheriting. As much as Dave coveted the job, he couldn't imagine going behind Leno's back to get it. He didn't know if he would ever be able to trust Jay again.

These were treacherous waters for their fellow comics to navigate. *The Tonight Show Starring Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* were the twin peaks of the stand-up comedy business—the best TV exposure a comic could get. So, no one wanted to appear to take sides in the Dave-Jay thing for fear of losing both a friend and a potential buyer. Truth be told, given the opportunity, most—if not all—of them would have done what Leno did, but they probably would have felt worse about doing it. Nobody blamed Jay, but everybody understood why Dave felt betrayed. Letterman was nothing if not loyal to his old friends (the joke among them was that he hadn't made a new one since 1979). In addition to Miller, he regularly brought on long-time pals Tom Dreesen, Richard Lewis, Johnny Dark, and Johnny Witherspoon. And it was, ironically, Letterman's frequent booking of Leno on NBC's *Late Night* all during the 1980s that had

helped propel Leno to the top rank of stand-up comedy and ultimately put him first in line for Carson's crown.

In contrast, Leno rarely featured stand-up comics on *The Tonight Show*, explaining to his old friends that the network didn't think they drew viewers, that the research showed people even tuned out when comics came on. The comics didn't buy it. They thought that, as host, Leno should buck the network brass and book anyone he thought was funny, just like Carson had before him. Fair or not, the knock on Jay was that he wouldn't go out of his way to help a fellow comic.

And yet, here he was, one of the busiest men in show business, spending a Sunday afternoon at the Laugh Factory, mixing easily with the old gang and reminiscing with obvious affection about a guy he hadn't hung out with in twenty-five years.

"George and I had nothing in common," Leno said. "Not one thing. Cars? [Leno collects them; George drove his mother's battered Chrysler LeBaron with cracked Corinthian leather seats and a peeling vinyl top.] Drugs? [Leno never did them; Miller never stopped.] But George always made me laugh," he said. "He was a true comic—not a sitcom actor or an improv performer. He was a classic stand-up; it was what he was meant to do."

He noted that their relationship had been conducted mostly by phone in recent years, with George calling frequently to critique his *Tonight Show* monologues or to apologize cheekily "for not being able to get me on the Letterman show. He suggested I send a tape."

One by one, Miller's old pals followed Leno to the microphone to share their favorite George joke or anecdote. The famously garrulous Dreesen explained why he was chosen to emcee by telling Miller's favorite joke about him: "The cops stopped Tom Dreesen the other night and asked him, 'You wanna talk here or down at the station?' Dreesen said, 'Both, and in the car, too.'"

Native American comic Charlie Hill launched into a call-and-response with some of Miller's best-remembered bits.

"Why are so many people drinking diet cola?" he shouted.  
"Because they are fat and thirsty," the crowd hollered back.

"A cow on speed . . . (rapid fire) Moo-moo-moo-moo-moo."

"How much does [comic] Paul Mooney weigh? . . . 200 pounds;  
180 without cologne."

"Last night I was watching an Elvis Presley movie on diet pills  
and Xanax . . . because that's the way Elvis would have wanted it."

"I went to see the movie *Accidental Tourist* and something hor-  
rible happened in the middle. . . . It continued."

The dialogue quickly devolved into a kind of shorthand that  
only they understood, as people in the audience began calling out  
their own favorite lines to uproarious reaction:

"Then the head waiter came over . . ." (guffaws, whooping).

"I'm chewin' and he's lookin', and I'm chewin' and he's lookin'  
. . ." (hands slapping on tables, tears of laughter).

"Yesterday I was sitting at Denny's having a waffle . . ." (falling  
out of their chairs).

And finally, some one shouted out, "one hundred eighteen,"  
which they all apparently considered the funniest number in the  
universe.

The "George stories" were more accessible to an outsider. Ross  
Schafer told of the time one of Miller's girlfriends broke up with  
him. "So, George took this picture of Jesus she had on her wall  
and wrote on it, 'Rot in hell,' and put it on the windshield of her  
car. The woman called the cops, who showed up at George's  
apartment and told him that the woman feared he was making a  
threat because it was a picture of Jesus. 'Oh, gee,' said George. 'I  
thought it was Dan Fogelberg.'"

Johnny Dark recalled the time that Miller got into an argu-  
ment with the manager of his neighborhood Starbucks and was  
told to get out and never come back. "Oh, my God," George had  
wailed. "Where am I ever going to find another Starbucks?"

Elayne Boosler remembered a middle-of-the night phone call  
the week she moved to Los Angeles in 1976:

“A voice says, ‘Hi, it’s George Miller. You met me last night at the Comedy Store. You’ve gotta come out to the corner of Sunset and Sweetzer and give me some money so I can buy some drugs.’

“I didn’t even have a checking account in those days,” Boosler went on, “and I had \$75 in cash to my name. But for some reason I got in my car and drove there, and he was standing by the curb. I rolled down my window, he reached in and took the money, and I drove away. Years later his punch line to me was, ‘You handed me \$75 when you didn’t even know who I was . . . so I consider you an enabler and the reason that I have a drug problem today.’”

Miller’s drug consumption was conspicuous even among this drug-experienced crowd. Quaaludes were his favorite in the early days; he preferred prescription Soma in later years. It was the dope as much as the leukemia that killed him because he’d get so high that he’d forget to take his life-preserving medicine. Dreesen, Letterman, Gary Muledeer, and Laugh Factory owner Jamie Masada had tried to stage an intervention with him in the months before he died—to no avail. Letterman flew to Los Angeles to be there, but when Miller saw them all together, he said, “Oh, this is that intervention shit, isn’t it? We’ll I’m not going for it.”

“George, you have to get straight,” Letterman told him. “You have to get well or else.”

“What does that mean?” Miller shot back nastily. “That you’re not going to put me on your show anymore?”

For Letterman it was like a sucker punch to the gut. He left hurt and angry, and he and Miller didn’t talk to each other for weeks afterwards—the only time in their long friendship that had ever happened.

Naturally, none of this was mentioned at the memorial, where one of the biggest laughs of the night was prompted by Kelly Montith’s drug-referenced quip, “George probably doesn’t know he’s dead yet.”

When it seemed for a second that Dreesen was steering dangerously close to sentimentality, saying, “I’m going to miss George’s

criticism of me,” Elayne Boosler pulled him back from the brink by calling out, “I’ll fill in for him,” to which someone in the back of the room added, “And when she dies. . . .”

The exchange kicked off a volley of high-spirited heckling, with insults and put-downs caroming around the room—“Yeah? It won’t be the first time you’ve used my material”—all goosed along gleefully by a beaming Leno, dressed as of old in well-worn jeans and a rumpled denim shirt and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Mike Binder, with whom he’d had a painful parting of the ways more than two decades before.

In that moment, they all seemed transformed. The years fell away. Suddenly, it was the mid-1970s. They were twenty-something, bubbling with ambition and bursting with dreams. No one was rich; no one was famous. No one had been to rehab; no one had died. Dave and Jay were still pals. They were all having the time of their lives. And no one had any inkling of what was about to happen.

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## Blood Brothers

Richard Lewis was scared. On a cool April evening in 1971, he was on the way from his apartment in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, to midtown Manhattan, driving through the Lincoln Tunnel in his silver Chevy Vega, a car with more electrical problems than he had neuroses. No mechanic could figure out what was wrong with the car. Typically, the tape deck would begin to slow down, causing the high-pitched vocals of Procol Harum to drop to the deepest of bass, and then the headlights would dim, alerting him to the fact that he was a mile or so from hell, when the engine would die. Which could be a big problem in the tunnel.

But that's not what he was afraid of. Earlier in the day, Lewis, a twenty-four-year-old Ohio State graduate with a degree in marketing, had finally decided what he wanted to be in life, what he had to be: a stand-up comic. And that scared the shit out of him.

Lewis had been funny as far back as he could remember, the class clown from kindergarten on. He fell in love with laughter at the age of five and gobbled up whatever comedy early television had to offer—*The Colgate Comedy Hour* with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, *Texaco Star Theater* with Milton Berle, *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar, *The Ed Wynn Show*. By age nine, he had

memorized the *TV Guide* schedule and was a discerning enough consumer of comedy to prefer Steve Allen to Ed Sullivan on Sunday night. He tried not to miss Oscar Levant's weekday afternoon show and stayed up late to catch Alexander King and Shelley Berman on Jack Paar.

Humor provided solace from the sense of isolation he felt growing up as the baby of his family with a considerably older brother and sister who consequently paid little attention to him. His father, William Lewis, known in northern New Jersey as "the King of Caterers," was devoted to his business and was seldom home. His mother was lonely and often depressed. The only time "Richie" felt connected to his parents was on the rare occasions when he would lie between them in their bed watching *The Honeymooners*. But the feeling lasted only as long as the show. So, he sought comfort in the company of comedians he found first on television and later on record albums: Jonathan Winters, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, and Carl Reiner. He came to think of himself as a rebel, laughing at authority, like Holden Caulfield.

He experienced an epiphany one day at Dwight Morrow High School in Englewood, New Jersey. During an assembly in the school gymnasium, he was mocking the people on stage under his breath and cracking up everyone around him when the principal suddenly stepped to the microphone and halted the proceedings. He directed the students to file out of the gym homeroom by homeroom until only Lewis's homeroom remained. Then he ordered the class to file out row by row until, out of the original nine hundred kids, only Lewis was left in the gym, whereupon the principal looked down at him and said, "Richard Lewis, you are *the* troublemaker of this school."

Most teenagers would have been mortified, terrified, undone by such a singling out. But Lewis appreciated the absurdity. His first thought was, "Hey, I might be able to make a living at this."

At first his plan was just to write comedy. In college he started jotting down funny premises and jokes in a notebook that he car-

ried everywhere he went. He fantasized about transitioning directly from student life to that of a staff writer for a TV star like Sid Caesar, which was how Woody Allen had gotten his start. When that didn't happen upon graduation, he hung around Columbus, Ohio, for nearly a year, doing odd jobs, afraid to return home to New Jersey and face his father's inevitable questions about finding "a real job."

What finally moved him out of Ohio was the news that one of his comic heroes, Robert Klein, was going to host a summer "replacement" show on network TV. A friend tracked down the address of Klein's manager, Buddy Morra, who was with the prestigious firm of (Jack) Rollins and (Charles) Joffe, which also managed Woody Allen and Dick Cavett. Lewis mailed off a package of material he wrote specifically for Klein and followed up a week later with a phone call to Morra, who'd been impressed enough with what he read to pass it on to Klein. Morra told Lewis to call him the next time he was in the New York area, and he'd arrange a meeting with the comedian. Lewis couldn't get back to New York quickly enough.

The meeting proved to be life changing, but not in the way Lewis had expected. "I read your stuff, and it's really good," Klein told him. "But I got into stand-up to express *myself*, so I only do my own stuff on stage. I don't get off doing other people's premises."

Lewis was disappointed but also buoyed by the praise and the fact that Morra had promised to hook him up with some older comics who were always looking to buy good stand-up material. The best known of them was Morty Gunty, a big star in the Catskills who'd appeared numerous times on TV. Over the next few months, Lewis earned a few hundred dollars writing jokes for Gunty and the others, but he was frustrated that they invariably turned down what he thought was his best stuff, the most personal material that expressed how he felt about the world around him. The obvious solution was to perform the material himself. But he couldn't even think about that because of the conversation it

would require with his father, whose approval he craved. What was he going to say? “Hey, Dad, I’ve decided to chuck the college education that you worked so hard to pay for in favor of becoming a stand-up comic?” Writing comedy was one thing—that was being a “humorist.” Performing comedy was something else entirely—that was *show business*, and they were not a show business family. He couldn’t imagine his father saying, “My son, the comedian,” with any pride. As a result, he was uncomfortable with the idea himself and felt guilty even considering it.

But all that ended on April 12, 1971, when William Lewis died of a heart attack (his fourth) at age fifty-seven. After the first wave of shock and grief, Richard realized that he was finally off the hook. He didn’t have to face the conversation that he so feared. His father’s death had freed him to find his own comic voice. Two weeks later, as he emerged safely from the Lincoln Tunnel in his haunted Vega, he said to himself, I’m writing jokes for Richard Lewis now. . . . But how am I ever going to get up on that stage? He headed uptown toward the only place he knew that might hold the answer to that question.

The Improvisation, at the corner of Forty-fourth Street and Ninth Avenue, was the comedy center of the universe. Established in 1963 by a former ad man named Budd Friedman, it was the only nightclub of its kind, a casual, chaotic cabaret where comedians and singers alternated sets and on any given night you might catch David Brenner and Jimmie Walker working out new material for *The Tonight Show*, Robert Klein blowing blues runs on his harmonica, Bette Midler doing some impromptu warbling in the bar accompanied by Dustin Hoffman on the piano, David Frye climbing out of a limousine in front with a drink in his hand, or Woody Allen arriving in a raincoat and fedora and dramatically instructing the doorman to “whisk me to my table.”

It was 8:30 p.m. on a Monday when Richard Lewis first walked into the Improv. Monday was “open-mike night,” when anyone with the will or compulsion to do so could get up onstage and

perform five minutes of material in the wild hope of impressing Friedman and being asked back to perform as a regular in the Tuesday-through-Sunday rotation. Lewis had no intention of getting up on stage, however. He was there purely for research purposes. For all his love and knowledge of stand-up comedy, he had never seen it performed live.

The first comic he saw was a handsome, shaggy-haired Jewish kid about his age whose name he didn't catch but who was everything he wanted to be as a performer—cool, hip, confident, sexy. He particularly liked the way the guy handled a heckler: “So, you come here to work out your heckles in a small club, right? Thinking that pretty soon you'll get really good at it and maybe someday you'll be in Vegas heckling the biggies?”

Between shows an hour later, Lewis saw the comic sitting alone in the back of the room, nursing a beer and looking morose. “Jeez, you were really great,” he said sincerely.

The guy's eyes lit up. “You're kiddin' me,” he said. “I thought it didn't go so well.”

“Naw, man, you were the best, hands down,” Lewis said. “I *aspire* to be that good.” They shook hands.

“I'm Richard Lewis.”

“Steve Lubetkin.”

Both felt an immediate connection. Lewis confessed that he was thinking about becoming a comic but had no idea how to go about it. Lubetkin said he knew a lot. “I'd be happy to show you the ropes,” he said. They wrote their phone numbers on cocktail napkins.

In the ensuing weeks, Lubetkin proved even better than his word, guiding Lewis on a tour of every bar, restaurant, disco, or strip club that allowed self-proclaimed comedians to entertain, or irritate, its customers. The itinerary included such oddball venues as Dan Lurie's Gym & Health Spa on Long Island and Gil Hodges's Grand Slam Lounge in Brooklyn, which abutted a bowling alley so that punch lines often had to compete with the crash of falling pins.

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