



Last Man Standing: Mort Sahl and the Birth of Modern Comedy

James Curtis

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Last Man Standing is a thoughtful and exhaustive account of the life of Mort Sahl.

With *Last Man Standing*, James Curtis offers a comprehensive and generally admiring biography of Mort Sahl, a stand-up comedian who brought the improvisational riffs of jazz to political and social commentary.

Tuxedo-clad comics along the Borscht Belt were still stealing jokes from one another when Sahl, clad in a V-neck sweater and grasping a newspaper, began his revolution at the Hungry i in San Francisco. For a decade or more, Sahl kept three steps ahead of the avant-garde, playing to larger and larger audiences. Although his reputation grew as a political commentator, candid and frank, probing and fearless, Sahl's own memory of his early popularity comes down to "It was women and behavior and trying to get along in the system."

The biography's opening is especially strong, dissecting the how and why of Sahl's success at the Hungry i. Oddly, that gig that came to Sahl primarily because the club's owner, Enrico Banducci, liked Sahl's political targets, including the demagogue Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Nixon and others got the needle next. Even the conservative saint Ronald Reagan had his political agenda turned into comedy fodder. Oddly, Sahl was able to maintain a companionable friendship with Reagan and his wife.

Research here is stellar, with a plethora of source material. In fact, there are almost eighteen pages of references detailing conversations with Sahl, with former wife China Lee Sahl, filmmaker Woody Allen, television host Dick Cavett, and records of interviews with entertainers like Steve Allen. Generally chronological, the narrative is clear and thorough.

This biography's strength rests in its forthright approach to its subject—Sahl's temperament, his marriages, and, most telling, his growing obsession that a conspiracy surrounded the death of President John F. Kennedy. That did much to derail his career, or rather provided impetus for Sahl to turn to writing and contributing to film and television scripts with some success.

Last Man Standing is a thoughtful and exhaustive account of the life of Mort Sahl, once dubbed by *Time* as "Will Rogers with fangs."

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