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Biography

Seven Dirty Words: The Life and Crimes of George Carlin
James Sullivan
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With sex and profanity on television, and X-rated music just a download click away, it's hard to imagine a time when entertainers were thrown in jail for words they used on stage. But that's what happened to comedian George Carlin in the early 1970s when he dared utter words that were verboten.

In his *Seven Dirty Words*, pop music and culture critic James Sullivan does far more than just record a period in American history when free speech was under assault. He tells the story of one of our funniest and sharpest comedic minds. Sullivan's Carlin is a man who followed in the steps of Lenny Bruce and eventually earned a place as one of the most important social commentators since Mark Twain.

Carlin was destined to be a troublemaker. His knuckles were reddened by the nuns in Catholic school in New York City; he ran with gangs in the streets; and he even tested the US Air Force, resulting in three court-martials. The rebel with a mouth eventually parlayed radio spots and night club gigs into appearances on popular television shows of the early 1960s. Later, he became a favorite of Johnny Carson.

But, as Sullivan points out in *Seven Dirty Words*, the 1960s Carlin was a phony. In his conservative establishment three-piece suit and closely cropped, network-approved haircut, Carlin wasn't being true to himself. He may have been killing audiences on the outside, but he was dying on the inside. It's in the transformation from square Carlin to hip Carlin where *Seven Dirty Words* truly shines. Carlin rails against Vietnam, grows his hair, wears an earring, fights back at hecklers, smokes pot, and gets arrested. And, most alarmingly and importantly, he dares to speak the seven words banned on the airwaves by the FCC. As he said, "Those are the [words] that'll infect your soul, curve your spine, and keep the country from winning the war."

Despite the resulting furor over the "Seven Words" (the case ended up in the Supreme Court), Carlin never looked back. He pioneered the HBO comedy special, riddling his

performances with the seven words, commentary on the absurdity of American life, and dark humor that others dared not touch. Nothing was off limits for this new Carlin. He was, as Sullivan writes, a “natural born transgressor.”

Somehow, Carlin managed to be endearing and non-threatening on stage even as he delivered his well-crafted dialogue punctuated with obscenities. As Jerry Seinfeld observed, “It was like the naughtiest, most fun grown-up you ever met was reading you a bedtime story.”

Dan Holmes