Funny Man: Mel Brooks

by
Patrick McGilligan
Synopsis

A deeply textured and compelling biography of comedy giant Mel Brooks, covering his rags-to-riches life and triumphant career in television, films, and theater, from Patrick McGilligan, the acclaimed author of Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane and Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light. Oscar, Emmy, Tony, and Grammy award—winner Mel Brooks was behind (and sometimes in front the camera too) of some of the most influential comedy hits of our time, including The 2,000 Year Old Man, Get Smart, The Producers, Blazing Saddles, and Young Frankenstein. But before this actor, writer, director, comedian, and composer entertained the world, his first audience was his family. The fourth and last child of Max and Kitty Kaminsky, Mel Brooks was born on his family’s kitchen table in Brooklyn, New York, in 1926, and was not quite three-years-old when his father died of tuberculosis. Growing up in a household too poor to own a radio, Mel was short and homely, a mischievous child whose birth role was to make the family laugh. Beyond boyhood, after transforming himself into Mel Brooks, the laughs that came easily inside the Kaminsky family proved more elusive. His lifelong crusade to transform himself into a brand name of popular humor is at the center of master biographer Patrick McGilligan’s Funny Man. In this exhaustively researched and wonderfully novelistic look at Brooks’ personal and professional life, McGilligan lays bare the strengths and drawbacks that shaped Brooks’ psychology, his willpower, his persona, and his comedy. McGilligan insightfully navigates the epic ride that has been the famous funnyman’s life story, from Brooks’s childhood in Williamsburg tenements and breakthrough in early television—working alongside Sid Caesar and Carl Reiner—to Hollywood and Broadway peaks (and valleys). His book offers a meditation on the Jewish immigrant culture that influenced Brooks, snapshots of the golden age of comedy, behind the scenes revelations about the celebrated shows and films, and a telling look at the four-decade romantic partnership with actress Anne Bancroft that superseded Brooks’ troubled first marriage. Engrossing, nuanced and ultimately poignant, Funny Man delivers a great man’s unforgettable life story and an anatomy of the American dream of success. Funny Man includes a 16-page black-and-white photo insert.
Look inside the book

Dedication

FOR CLANCY, BOWIE, AND SKYE

Epigraph

My mind is a raging torrent flooded with rivulets of thought cascading into a waterfall of creative alternatives.—HEDLEY LAMARR, Blazing Saddles

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1926 Little World

What made Melvin, the youngest of the Kaminsky kids, so darn funny? Later people said—he himself said—it was Brooklyn, the Depression, being Jewish and growing up in the shadow of Hitler. But there was also something about birth order and the family genes that contributed to “the strange amalgam, the marvelous pastiche that is me.” Before there was Mel Brooks there were the Kaminskys. The Kaminsky family formed their own little world in Brooklyn, the mother and four brothers living in humble circumstances, the brothers sharing the same bed and crawling over one another like a litter of adorable puppies in a cardboard box, as Brooks often said in interviews. The oldest, Irving, was almost ten when his youngest brother was born. Intelligent and wholesome, Irving acted more like a father than an older brother when Melvin was growing up. He was the only Kaminsky brother to get his college diploma. Leonard was older than baby Melvin by seven years. Unassuming Lenny was interested in machines and science. As time would tell, he had the stuff of a war hero. Bernard, only four years older, was closest in age and perhaps also in jaunty-jolly spirit. He was also the best athlete among the brothers. In his youth Bernard was “a great softball pitcher” (in Brooks’s words) and a star of Brooklyn bowling leagues. His older brothers held regular jobs and helped out with household expenses long before Melvin finished high school. Each played a different role inside the family and in life, but birth order—being the youngest—benefited Melvin, just as the B for Brooks alphabetically advantaged the sequence of his later writing credits. Melvin was still in diapers when his father passed away; his older brothers mentored and shielded him. Being the youngest, most pampered brother with the least responsibility in the family, Melvin found that his role from infancy was to make people laugh. His family tossed baby “Melb’n” (as his mother called him in her fractured English) into the air, he made funny sounds, and they all cracked up. Everyone indulged the last born, Brooks recalled in many interviews, so much so “my feet never touched the floor until I was two.” Making people laugh—forging a career out of laughter—became his lifelong quest. In time millions of people would find the youngest Kaminsky hilarious, whether they experienced his comedy on television or in stage plays, recordings, advertisements, or motion pictures. Eventually he’d make several hundred times as much money from his comedy as all his brothers combined—or, for that matter, most of his famous show business friends. The mother of the four boys had to be a miracle woman, and Kitty Kaminsky was: “a little Jewish rhino,” in Brooks’s words, and as good-humored as she was hard-charging. Shorter than her boys, which was really short—“so short she could walk under a coffee table with a high hat on,” Brooks liked to say—Kitty worked like a slave day and night, stretching the dollars and pushing her boys through school, dividing the love and matzah ball soup equally. She was the heart and soul of the family and the supreme boss. As a boy
Irwin Alan Kniberg, who later changed his name to Alan King when he, too, grew up to become a comedian, lived in Williamsburg, a Brooklyn neighborhood, at the same time as the Kaminskys. He remembered the formidable sight of the family as they arrived as one to pick up the youngest of the bunch after the school bell, the three older boys surrounding Kitty in a phalanx as the Kaminskys swept across the playground and swooped down on little Melvin. They were a tight-knit, fierce, single-minded unit.

Before Brooklyn there was Manhattan, where the Kaminsky clan, the paternal side of the family, turned up on Henry Street in the 1900 census amid the tidal wave of European and Russian Jews flooding into the Lower East Side of New York City. Many immigrant Jews came to the United States to escape religious pogroms in their native lands, while others were seeking economic opportunity. Persecution and opportunity were the yin and yang of Jewish identity, and they were fused in the bloodline of the Kaminskys. Most Henry Street denizens were Russian Jews. Their number included thirty-two-year-old Abraham Kaminsky and his wife, Bertha, who arrived in America in about 1896, with their eldest child, Martha, and her brother Maximilian James, called Max. Max was born on January 8, 1893; some records say in Grodno, an ancient city near the onetime western border of Poland and Lithuania; others say in Danzig, then a region encompassing the city now known as Gdansk. Grodno was part of the Russian Empire before remapping, and Gdansk was a Baltic Sea industrial port within imperial Germany. In Russia, Abraham Kaminsky had been a traveling merchant who specialized in sewing and knitting supplies. He had learned to read and write in English by the time of the 1900 census, although his wife relied upon Yiddish for most of her long life. Kaminsky also knew enough Norwegian to strike deals with the Norse captains who arrived in New York with their ship holds filled with herring—the coveted silver of the sea. Selling herring to Eastern European Jews on the Lower East Side in the early twentieth century was akin to selling white rice to Chinese. The Kaminsky herring business boomed with, at its height, a storefront on Henry Street, a warehouse close by on Essex, and reportedly a hundred neighborhood pushcarts. Eight Kaminsky children were born in New York following Martha and Max: ten siblings in all. The Kaminskys were as good-hearted as they were prosperous. Even with twelve members in his own household, Abraham, whom everyone called “Shloimy,” made room for relatives arriving from Russia. He donated generously to Jewish charities. Perhaps that was how the Kaminskys became acquainted with the Brookmans, who came to the United States in about 1899, initially living on Norfolk Street, a few blocks north of the herring dealer. Their surname, first reported as “Brockman” in the 1905 New York census, became “Bruckman” a few years later. The spelling changes might be ascribed to the family’s imperfect English, or perhaps, later, a desire to shed the name of the patriarch, Isaac Bruckman, a tailor from Kiev who arrived in 1899 with his wife, Minnie, and three children, including the last to be born in Kiev, two-year-old Kate or Katie, called “Kitty.” Three more Brookman children followed. But the Brookman side of the family—the “Brooks” in Mel Brooks—experienced setbacks and did not flourish like the Kaminskys. Isaac “absconded” from his wife and six children in early 1906, according to documents, and was never seen nor heard from again. Minnie did not matriculate beyond primary school and only ever spoke Yiddish; she did not boast a profession. Throughout the ordeal of her abandonment the mother of six kept two her two youngest children, four-year-old Dora and one-year-old Sadie, at home. Kitty and one or more of her siblings were sent uptown to the main building of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York on Amsterdam Avenue between 136th and 138th Streets. The Hebrew Benevolent Society paid Minnie’s rent starting in 1906, and immigrant neighbors pitched in to help out the family. The original surname disappeared from records for five or ten years, reemerging as “Brookman” by World War I. The five Brookman sisters and their brother were
devoted to one another as a result of this early family rupture—especially the sisters, who were close to their mother and keenly felt Minnie’s hardships and humiliation. The weeks if not months that Kitty spent as a young girl in Jewish charity homes fortified her survival skills in preparation for life’s later tribulations and made her a tenacious mother. The Kaminskys were not dependent on the garment industry, which employed thousands of immigrant Jews in New York City, but the Brookmans may have had a familial foothold in women’s wear. The sisters took their first jobs as floor girls and milliners, while Joseph, the only boy and oldest sibling, started as a capmaker. One way or another, nineteen-year-old Kitty Brookman met and fell in love with twenty-two-year-old Max Kaminsky by late 1915. Both already had passed the US citizenship test and been naturalized. Their marriage took place on January 31, 1916, after which Mrs. Max Kaminsky briefly moved in with her husband at the family’s crowded 200 Henry Street address. Within the year, however, the newlyweds joined the swelling exodus of Jews from the Lower East Side that moved to Brooklyn, one of the five New York City boroughs, across the nearby Williamsburg Bridge; they initially took up residence on Stone Avenue in Brownsville. Brooklyn was an enclave separate from Manhattan, with its own unique character, then as now comprising distinct neighborhoods, thickly populated by people with a common ethnicity, religion, national origin, or income level. Brownsville was an eastern district packed with poor Eastern European Jews, tenements, and synagogues. Max Kaminsky, who bore the high expectations for the oldest Kaminsky son, was a catch: short and wiry, with brown eyes and a full head of black hair. He could read and write English, and he had bookkeeping skills. He had an auspicious job as a general factotum for an attorney, Jacob W. Hartman, whose offices were situated on Broadway in lower Manhattan; his varied duties included serving as an investigator for insurance cases, knocking on doors as a process server, and acting as a public notary. As for Kitty, a striking redhead with pop eyes, she had a commanding personality from girlhood. Soon after marriage she devoted herself to motherhood, giving birth to her first son, Irving, in late 1916, then to Leonard in 1919 and Bernard in 1922. By the time her fourth baby came along on a muggy summer day, June 28, 1926, the Kaminskys were ensconced in 515 Powell Street, still in Brownsville, sharing a building with a hundred other people, the vast majority Jewish, listing Russia or Poland as birthplaces. A great number of the occupants were unable to read or write English; Yiddish was their language. The Kaminsky family was so poor, Mel Brooks liked to say, that his mother couldn’t afford the medical expenses—so “the lady next door gave birth to me.” Actually, Kitty gave birth while lying on the kitchen table, which was standard in that era, especially among the lower classes. The couple named the newborn Melvin with no middle name. By now Max, the father of four sons, was toiling round the clock for Joseph J. Jacobs, the law partner of Jacob Hartman, who had died in the postwar flu epidemic. Mel Brooks said in later interviews his father had sometimes delivered writs and summonses to celebrities such as the Broadway musical headliner Marilyn Miller, “and he’d often get into the picture with them. He was known at the courthouse as ‘Process Server to the Stars.’” But this is hand-me-down family lore, and little evidence of Max’s brushes with celebrities can be found. Much of Max’s work was as a paralegal for court filings. Over the next three years the Kaminsky family moved several times, first to an apartment on South 4th Street in Williamsburg, which lay northeast of Brownsville, adjoining the East River where the Williamsburg Bridge penetrated Brooklyn; then to another multifamily dwelling at nearby 145 South 3rd. The Brookman sisters, who helped Kitty out, lived in the same Williamsburg neighborhood, as did Grandma Minnie. 3rd Street was the family’s address when Max Kaminsky was admitted to Kings County Hospital two days before Christmas 1928, suffering from chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, which was a pandemic ailment among immigrants living in unhealthy crowded conditions. Max
died on January 14, 1929, having marked his thirty-sixth birthday as he lay dying in hospital. Curiously, his death certificate lists as his address 16th Avenue in New Utrecht, a distant Brooklyn neighborhood within Bensonhurst, probably because that was where his parents now lived and Abraham Kaminsky had footed the hospital bills. A temporary estrangement between Max and Kitty cannot be ruled out, however. One relative interviewed for this book depicted Max Kaminsky as a secretive, brooding, hard-wired personality. Max spent most of his time busy at work and at home was often tense and moody. He left the parenting to Kitty, that relative said. The family lived frugally. Radio ownership was considered one measure of affluence, and the Kaminskys did not own a radio set, according to the 1930 census. But another curious detail surrounding his death suggests that Max possessed hidden resources. From 1917, New York State corporation records list Max Kaminsky as a founding shareholder in a surprising number of business enterprises, including the D. Wald Mfg. Co., which marketed food products and glassware; the K. & C. Dress Company, Inc., which manufactured and sold dress apparel; the Abraham Pomerantz Company, Inc., which collected and traded woolen rags and remnants; and Hygienic Hot Salt Water Baths, Inc., which specialized in hot-water baths. Mel Brooks’s father may have been a nominal signatory fronting for lawyers, but his business shares were sometimes valued as high as $100 each and in number might run to ten. The various entities were launched, in certain instances, with as much capital as $10,000; some appear to have been going concerns at the time of Max’s death. Devastated by the loss of their golden child, Abraham and Bertha Kaminsky unstintingly assisted Kitty and her four boys in the years ahead. “He gave us money sometimes or gobs of herring,” Brooks recalled. “Lenny used to collect the herring.” (His beloved firstborn son was the only member of his immediate family to have predeceased Abraham when the Kaminsky patriarch passed away in 1948; his wife, Bertha, survived Abraham, as did their nine other offspring—then still alive and well.) The Brookmans were just as profoundly committed to helping the bereaved mother raise four sons on her own. Grandma Minnie helped out with babysitting and cooking. Aunt Sadie always lived close by Kitty (sometimes in the same building) and tithed out of her garment industry paycheck to her sister’s family. Sadie also arranged piecework for Kitty when the children were asleep, at relatives’, or in school. She remained a spinster and after retirement shared a condo with Kitty in Florida. Mel Brooks was two and a half years old when his father passed away; all he would ever know about Max Kaminsky was what family members told him; that included the faint notion his father was “lively, peppy, sang well.” Melvin shrugged off that heartache as a boy, saying he never even thought about not having a father until later in time. But subconsciously it must have influenced him, he subsequently realized; for one thing, it affected how he dealt with his own family responsibilities as an adult and father. “There’s a side of Mel that will never be fulfilled, no matter how hard he drives himself,” his friend novelist Joseph Heller once said, “and it all goes back to his father’s death.” Brownsville, where Max and Kitty Kaminsky started out after their marriage, was probably the most densely populated, most Jewish section of Brooklyn in the early 1920s—the most religious, Orthodox, Old World neighborhood. Gentiles were neither common in nor alien to Williamsburg, which was more polyglot and fluid than Brownsville, its jammed, low-rent housing and slum dwellings broken up by occasional fields and parks. Not long after Max’s death, Kitty moved the family one more time, just a couple of blocks north, to the home of first memories for Melvin, now a toddler. This cheaper apartment house stood at 365 South 3rd, “close to the corner of Hooper and Keith,” in Mel Brooks’s words, and the Kaminskys lived on “the top floor of a five-story building.” South 3rd in Williamsburg became the first crucible of his humor. The neighborhood was tough and impoverished, in ways both good
and bad, and Brooks could recall boyhood memories of a suicide victim, for example, a
despondent building jumper, whose broken body lay on the sidewalk amid the police and
ambulances. Little Melvin suffered a fright, noticing that the dead woman wore the same brand
of shoes as his mother. Almost from the cradle, it seemed, Melvin could make jokes out of his
terrors and pitfalls. Kitty Kaminsky, rarely interviewed, said once that her youngest son’s
special knack for drawing laughter had first become obvious to her when Melvin was about five
years old—around the time the family settled on South 3rd Street. “He was very talented,” she
said. “He showed signs of it. He was a lively boy. He was never a quiet boy.” The first targets of
his comedy were undoubtedly his Jewish neighbors in the crowded 3rd Street tenements, “a
hotbed of artistic intellectuality,” in his words. They “filled their daily lives with assorted
expressions of art, particularly with theater, music and dance. Above all they loved theater. And
these tenement Jews loved books and serious plays—Boris Thomashefsky-type plays.” They
loved information so much they could read a dental manual with fierce appreciation, as if it was
a comic book.” Kitty’s lively boy drew from his observations of the other inhabitants of his
building. “My very first impressions were of Mrs. Bloom and Mrs. Rosenthal,” Brooks
remembered. “We had Mr. Katz on the third floor. He had a fierce stutter. For me, he was like
an ace in the hole. And the guy who lived in apartment 9B had this crazy walk.” Another early
fount of imagination for him was actors and the fictional characters they portrayed in motion
tables. Sometimes on weekends, his mother took the boys to Feldman’s, a beer garden
restaurant on Coney Island, which offered free silent pictures to customers along with its
beloved hot dogs. There for the first time little Melvin watched Charlie Chaplin and Buster
Keaton while eating “a frankfurter, a root beer and a boiled-to-death ear of corn.” Later in life
Brooks would express varying opinions about Chaplin and Keaton, telling the New York Times
in 1976 that Modern Times “isn’t all that funny” and The General was “dreadful,” while pointedly
siding with the zanier comedians whom many critics viewed as less artistic. Never mind. “I fell
in love with movies right there,” Brooks recalled. “This was much better than real life. Who
needs real life?” Closer to home, on Broadway as it wove through Williamsburg, were “many
movie houses” offering “three features for ten cents or a double feature and a ‘chapter’ [in a
serial] and Fox Movietone News, the races, where if you chose the right one you got a stick of
gum for free.” On Fridays his mother would “put out three milk bottles,” Brooks recalled; she
would “get nine cents back and then borrow a penny from somewhere so she could give me
ten cents to go to the movies.” Sometimes, if Kitty had other things to do, Melvin would go hand
in hand with one of his grandmothers to the theater at the corner of Marcy and Broadway; just
as often one of his older brothers took him to a matinee. Around Hanukkah in 1931, it must
have been, he saw director James Whale’s version of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, starring
Boris Karloff as the Monster. Little Melvin was not yet six; no wonder that at home afterward,
he had recurring nightmares of the Monster climbing up the fire escape toward his bedroom
window; and no surprise, forty years on, that he recalled the classic horror film so vividly when
sending up its scary story, its spooky milieu and atmospherics in Young Frankenstein. As a
nonagenarian, Brooks could reel off favorite stars and scenes from movies he had first
watched in boyhood, those that had afforded escape from the “outside” world, where “life was
dirty and hard.” He relished The Adventures of Robin Hood with the dauntless Errol Flynn;
Flash Gordon and other boy-oriented fantasy adventures; carefree musicals, especially the
series starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; and the slapstick of the reigning comedy
teams, many of them Jewish, such as the Three Stooges, but especially those that were made
up of brothers—the surreal Marxes, the goofy Ritzes. The Ritz brothers, Al, Jimmy, and Harry,
were former Brooklyntites, of whom the youngest brother, Harry, was “the sire of mugging,” in
Brooks's view. Pure clowns who made stupid puns with manic eye-rolling, the Ritzes were also comedic song-and-dance artists. The boy loved their wacky number “The Horror Boys from Hollywood” from One in a Million in 1936, with Al as a singing-dancing Frankenstein’s Monster. Brooks would incorporate a lot of mugging into his career, and “The Horror Boys from Hollywood” was an example of how he frequently drew from youthful favorites later, to inspire and to create memorable scenes such as “Puttin’ on the Ritz” in Young Frankenstein. The boy began to follow the films of Alfred Hitchcock, dating to a reissue of The Lodger, a silent thriller he saw at a Brooklyn theater with his brother Irving, and he’d rush to any picture featuring Cary Grant in the lead—or, for that matter, any glossy British production with a tall handsome leading man and lady with perfect diction and teeth. His own teeth? A dentist looked into his mouth, diagnosed cavities, and pulled four teeth out for fifty cents each after Kitty balked at a dollar each for fillings. The surprise of the anecdote may be that he even visited a dentist, but for the rest of his life he had “tooth problems because of that,” his son Max Brooks told an interviewer decades later. When he was seven going on eight years of age, Melvin physically escaped Williamsburg for the first time. He left behind his brothers and mother and New York and felt the first pangs of insecurity, and he learned to defend himself by making strangers laugh. The boy spent part of the summer of 1934 at Camp Sussex in New Jersey, spread over one hundred scenic acres on the shore of Lake Glenwood in Sussex County. Although it was run by a Jewish welfare organization and underwritten by comedian Eddie Cantor, Camp Sussex was open and free to all orphans and poor children. The goal was to provide needy children with a respite from the city’s sweltering summers and its dismal slum conditions while immersing them in nature and outdoor activities. Melvin rose with the other kids early every morning to boom out the camp ditty (“We welcome you to Sussex Camp/We’re mighty glad you’re here/We’ll send the air reverberating/With a mighty cheer!”) and to eat crabapples until his belly ached. At Camp Sussex Melvin found his first audience outside the neighborhood. Whatever dictum the camp counselors issued to the boys, he would promptly subvert for laughs. (“Stay at the shallow end of the pool until you learn to drown!”) At one weekend show the boy took center stage to offer his devastating imitation of a counselor. “I brought the house down,” he recalled years later, “and I understood then that if you take comedy from life instead of repeating Henny Youngman jokes it works even better.” Jokes protected him, he learned. “They were afraid of my tongue . . . words were my equalizer.” His antics preempted the counselors and made a nonathlete feel as though he belonged with the other boys. “Who said that? Kaminsky! Grab him! Hold him! Slap!” Brooks recalled. “But the other kids liked it and I was a success. I needed a success. I was short, I was scrawny. I was the last one they picked to be on the team.” He loved singing and dancing and clowning more than sports. When relatives gathered, he did animal impressions (“As a boy, I could make the greatest cat sounds in the world”) and sang favorite songs, shuffling his feet in time with the music, which was not uncommon, even among Brooklyn kids, in an era that exalted song and dance on Broadway and radio and in movies. “I always got ’em at family parties,” Brooks said years later, “with [Al] Jolson’s ‘Toot, Toot, Tootsie,’ and Eddie Cantor’s ‘If You Knew Susie.’” After his Camp Sussex summer, toward the end of 1934, Joe Brookman, Kitty’s older brother, arranged a special outing for the eight-year-old that proved as influential as any experience—good, bad, or indifferent—that Melvin notched in his boyhood. Cherished Uncle Joe, now a taxi driver, was a “character” with peculiar mannerisms and maxims; sometimes he was mock wise (“Marry a fat girl, don’t marry a face”); sometimes he made head-scratching pronouncements (“Never eat chocolate after chicken”). The diminutive Joe wore Adler’s elevator shoes and drove a Parmelee cab sitting on a stack of phone books with a special apparatus that allowed him to
shift gears and operate the pedals and brakes. “When you saw a cab coming down the street with no driver at the wheel,” Brooks said, “that was Uncle Joe.” Uncle Joe was absorbed into the boy’s repertoire, and years later there would be a little of him in the 2000 Year Old Man. Uncle Joe had done a mitzvah for a Manhattan doorman who thanked the taxi man with a pair of tickets for Anything Goes, the hottest show on Broadway after its opening in late November 1934. The Cole Porter musical starred the electrifying Ethel Merman. Uncle Joe in his taxi chauffeured his nephew to the Alvin Theatre. The two sat “in the next to the last row at the top of the balcony,” Brooks recalled with writerly exaggeration. The performers weren’t using microphones in those days. Still, “all these Russian Jewish melodies that came from Cole Porter . . . Ethel Merman started to sing, and I had to hold my ears—she had a big voice. It was the most thrilling experience of my life.” “That day infected me with the virus of the theater,” he recalled in Michael Kantor’s documentary Broadway: The American Musical seventy years later. Cole Porter became “my all-time favorite composer,” he said, but over time Uncle Joe took his nephew to other Broadway musicals that impressed the boy, including Hellzapoppin’ in 1938, a hectic revue stuffed with slapstick and sight gags, written by and starring the goyish comedy duo of John “Ole” Olsen and Harold “Chic” Johnson. “A musical not only transports you, but stays in your brain because of the songs,” Brooks told Kantor. “The musical blows the dust off your soul, like no other phenomenon in the history of show business.” Even before he saw his first musical the stage-struck boy already knew “the tunes and lyrics to a whole bunch of the numbers,” because there was “music in the air, music everywhere,” in his Brooklyn neighborhood, as he wrote in a piece he bylined more than half a century later for The Times of London. “Bing Crosby singing ‘From Monday On’ on the radio, the Millers in the next apartment playing Russ Columbo records on their wind-up Victrola, a wannabe Benny Goodman practicing ‘Don’t Be That Way’ on his squeaky clarinet in the apartment across the backyard, a piano player in the open window of Heller’s Music Emporium down the street knocking out Broadway tunes as a come-on to peddle street music.” When music wasn’t in the air, there were plenty of other things for a boy to see and do all day long on crowded 3rd Street. The backyards and front steps were clogged with kids from big Jewish families. The Kaminskys played stickball, stoopball, and bottle-cap checkers and invented card games “with dirty old, very thick cards.” With precious pennies they bought egg creams delicious enough to make you “swoon with ecstasy.” Somehow the pennies always stretched. “We were really poor but so was everybody else,” Brooks said. “We always had enough to eat. Our poverty didn’t really bother us emotionally.” He added, “Being poor was good! It was a good thing for me.” The older brothers chipped in money from their small jobs. Before Melvin was a teenager, Kitty convened a family meeting. The Kaminskys lived in a fifth-floor back apartment with a view of fluttering clotheslines and prowling cats, which cost about sixteen dollars monthly; it had a kitchen, a living room, Kitty’s bedroom, and another room for the boys. “One big bed for us, and we slept across the mattress,” Brooks said. “I loved it because I loved my brothers, and I loved the action, and I loved being warm.” Kitty made sure of the warmth. “On cold winter mornings,” Brooks recalled, she “put my underwear, my socks, my shirt and trousers on the radiator, and she dressed me under the covers. And she gave me kisses and whistled while she was doing it. When I go onstage or write something, I want my clothes from the radiator. I want my mother whistling.” The space was okay, but Kitty yearned for a front apartment with a big window overlooking busy 3rd Street. Such an apartment had just been vacated and was available for a few more dollars per month. Irving and Leonard agreed to squeeze the extra money out of their earnings, and the family moved again from inside the building. Until he was about ten Melvin went to grade school at P.S. 19, and then it was J.H.S.
50 for junior high—both schools located on different nearby blocks of South 3rd. Junior high was a shock to the system, Brooks said later, because it introduced the concept of homework into his life. He remembered struggling with a test calling for him to memorize the names of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Irving had just returned home from Brooklyn College, where he was studying pharmacy and chemistry at night after “working at a ten-hour job during the day to help pay the rent.” His older brother sat down to help and asked Melvin where he played punchball. On Rutledge Street, he replied. Where else? Rodney Street. On and on through all the familiar streets of their turf, even Williamsburg itself the name of a Declaration of Independence signer, William Williams, Irving pointed out. “I got an A on the exam,” Brooks recalled. Not the best student, by his own admission, since he couldn’t sit still for very long, Melvin was less an avid reader than “an avid talker and doer.” If he read at all, it was more likely to be comics than book-books. Yet like his brothers he easily got good grades in science classes, and perhaps for that reason Kitty did not worry too much about her youngest son. Kitty was really something: “the best cook in the world,” a person with an “exuberant joy of living,” in Brooks’s memory. Melvin could say virtually anything at all and get a smile or a chuckle out of his mother. He was encouraged, coddled. Among his tales of growing up there was not one of Kitty spanking him. As Melvin became a teenager, he hung out with friends in daytime and darkness, honing his wisecracks. He regarded himself as the “undisputed champ of corner shtick.” Street-corner shtick was “a kind of rudimentary stand-up comedy,” as his first biographer, William Holtzman, explained, “an unruly verbal slapstick.” Brooks recalled: “The corner was tough. You had to score on the corner—no bullshit routines, no slick laminated crap . . . and you really had to be good on your feet. . . . Real stories of tragedy we screamed at.” By junior high he was roaming freely across Williamsburg, and he and his friends even took twenty-minute walks across the long suspension bridge to the Lower East Side for knishes and root beer. “That was okay, there were a lot of Jews there,” he recalled. “However, when we’d go any farther uptown it became very scary and very exciting.” He and his pals experienced a few close calls. They hung out at the neighborhood Woolworth’s and were known to pocket the yo-yos and cap pistols. One time Melvin was making his getaway with a cap pistol when he felt the manager clutch his shoulder. “Without thinking I turned the cap gun on him and said, ‘Lemme go or I’ll blow your head off,’” Brooks recalled. “He was so surprised that he stepped back, and I ran around him and out the door.” Brooks told variations of that yarn in many interviews in later years, but the incident must have happened in some way; an uproarious reimagining of it occurs in Blazing Saddles when Black Bart (Cleavon Little), threatened by the racist townsfolk of Rock Ridge, turns his own gun around and threatens to shoot himself. By that time in his young life, admittedly, Melvin was watching “a big diet of Western movies” either with his best friend, Eugene Cohen—or alone at some “dump neighborhood theater. My mother was always sending an older brother to drag me out. Sometimes I went there when it opened at 11:30 in the morning and stayed until nightfall starved to death, a splitting headache, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the screen.” As boys will do, he’d watch all those cowboys sitting around the campfire eating beans and wonder about farting. “How many beans could you eat and how much black coffee could you drink out of those tin cups without letting one go?” On the Williamsburg Bridge he and Cohen smoked a pack of Sensations for the first time. The young teenagers had a contagious-laughter friendship. The pair had begun to sneak into neighborhood movies rather than fork over their pennies, and one time they were caught at it and dragged into the manager’s office. They just couldn’t stop laughing. “You have your choice,” the manager barked. “I could call the police or give you a beating.” Melvin shouted, “Beating!” at the same time that Cogan yelled, “The
police!" The youths burst into more helpless laughter. The manager glared. "Just get out of here!"

By the mid-1930s, Kitty had decided to move yet again, this time across Brooklyn, as far southwest as one could go before splashing into the Lower New York Bay: to Brighton Beach, named for the English resort town, one of several shore-adjacent communities leading to Coney Island. Once the westernmost barrier island of Long Island, Coney Island was by now a fabled sandbar destination of fairgrounds and amusement rides for New Yorkers. Brighton Beach was densely populated and heavily Jewish, but perhaps Kitty moved the family there to be close to the ocean and Bensonhurst, where Abraham and Bertha Kaminsky still maintained their residence. There were vague Kaminsky relatives sprinkled all over the borough, synagogue leaders and public officials, including a radical state assemblyman who probably accounted for Brooks's later remarks about "my Labor Party beginnings in Brooklyn." Kitty's family usually celebrated holidays with Kaminsky aunts, uncles, and cousins; some served fancy melon balls and lived in luxury buildings with elevators, at which Melvin and his brothers, the shabby relatives, gawked. Passover was always held at Grandfather Shloimy's, with the elder statesman presiding over the rituals of the Seder. Max's youngest brother, Leon, a teacher, sat closest to the children's table and regaled them with play-by-plays of Mel Ott at bat —going, going, done! Perhaps Melvin's family moved to the larger Brighton Beach apartment because the household now boasted a lodger, Kitty's boyfriend, Anthony Lombardi. Born in Italy and a few years older than Kitty, Tony was "a pal" to take the place of her deceased spouse (that is how Lainie Kazan, playing Belle Carroca, describes her second husband, who acts as stepfather to the Mel Brooks character in My Favorite Year). The brothers called their mother's boyfriend "Uncle Tony" or "T." Brooks didn't often mention Uncle Tony in interviews, but one time he described him as a trash collector who gave the boys and their friends rides to Coney Island in his garbage truck. ("The garbage trucks were big . . . people got out of the way!") Probably Uncle Tony held several jobs; the 1940 census lists him, like Aunt Sadie, as working in the garment industry—a presser of ladies' coats. Some days in those Brighton Beach summers Melvin and his friends headed to Ebbets Field in Flatbush, scrounging Brooklyn Dodgers tickets. If they couldn't get their hands on extra tickets or couldn't afford the scalped ones, they'd sneak through cracks in the gate, St. Louis outfielder Joe "Ducky" Medwick waving to them as they grabbed seats. Most summer days they spent at the beach: their place on Brighton's 6th Street and Mostmere was three blocks from the boardwalk. Forever after, saltwater ran in Brooks's veins. "Right near the sea and I loved that," he recalled, "loved the smell of the ocean." Irving, by then in his early twenties, was working as a shipping clerk for a shirt factory while still taking night courses at Brooklyn College. Leonard was a runner for a novelty company. Bernard sold newspapers and magazines for a newsstand dealer. And now, only twelve, Melvin was earning his first nickels and dimes running errands for elderly people and relaying phone messages to neighbors from the corner pharmacy. Saintly Aunt Sadie continued to toil in leisurewear in the garment center, and she brought home "bathing suit sashes," Brooks recalled, for his mother to turn "inside out with a long metal rod." His mother was often surrounded by "enormous bags" of such homework from the garment trade, working late into the night, he said. But such work was almost always at home and off the books; resourceful about money, Kitty "lived on welfare checks," Brooks insisted in interviews. She is listed in every public record, through his high school years, as unemployed, without a profession, or simply as "mother." The family paid regular visits to Williamsburg, where they still claimed close relatives on the Brookman side, and after dark the teenager hung out near a shop that sold candy and soda. Melvin and his friends traded wisecracks as they waited for a school acquaintance of Lenny's—Lenny's age—to pass by on his way home late at
night. That friend of Lenny's stood out on 3rd Street not only because he was dark and handsome and resembled John Garfield in a gauzy light. He was homosexual—not that the teenagers realized that right away, nor was it ever mentioned. And he was an actor who aspired to be a writer and director. Born Daniel Appel, the son of a Russian ballet dancer, that neighborhood acquaintance even already had a stage name: Don Appell. A warmhearted, exuberant person, Appell was friendly to all the 3rd Street kids, who regarded him as "our show business god," in Mel Brooks's words. Appell always paused to chat with the youths, sharing gossip about the famous people he had crossed paths with backstage on his engagements—mostly small parts in Yiddish theater and summer stock. But Appell had also done a few walk-ons with the celebrated Group Theatre and had understudied Garfield himself, who was also Jewish, a Brooklyn hero. The teenagers tried out their jokes and bits on him. Appell encouraged them with his laughter. He took a particular liking to Melvin, the most persistent if not the funniest of the bunch, who asked half-jokingly if Appell might help him get into show business. Appell was about to go to work, in the summer of 1940, as the social director of the Avon Lodge near Woodridge, New York, in the Catskill Mountains. About ten miles down the road from the Avon Lodge, near Hurleyville, was another, smaller operation, the Butler Lodge, which every summer needed a supply of teenagers to fill lowly staff positions. Appell told Melvin that he could put in a good word for him with the Butler Lodge owner; Appell himself would be close by, organizing the entertainment for Avon Lodge guests. Melvin could draw a summer paycheck and perhaps moonlight in the Avon Lodge shows, as resorts in the same areas shared guest activities. Fourteen-year-old Melvin leaped at the chance. The Catskill Mountains in southern New York State, about a hundred miles northwest of Manhattan, hosted a constellation of hotels, boardinghouses, and bungalow colonies that catered primarily to immigrant Jews, frequently Yiddish-speaking and largely from the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. Some of the estimated one thousand hotels were palatial resorts; others were humble cabin camps. Almost uniformly they offered a kosher diet—hence the "Borscht Belt" nickname—and a hamish feeling for their clientele, who swam in pools or lakes, played golf, went on hayrides, and enjoyed country hikes. Fresh air and outdoor life were the attractions, with daily activities and entertainment. Most big venues had a social director who acted as master of ceremonies and staged theatricals with a core group of professionals hired for the summer; some of the biggest hotels presented as many as three shows a week: one dramatic, one comedy, one revue. Both the Avon Lodge and the Butler Lodge were located in Sullivan County. Neither ranked high in the Catskills hierarchy; neither lodge was as magnificent, sprawling, or expensive as the fabled Grossinger's, with its (eventually) several dozen buildings, twelve hundred acres, and one hundred and fifty thousand guests annually. Even so, the Butler Lodge boasted spacious grounds with a swimming pool and handball courts and a dining room that a band could transform nightly into a ballroom dance paradise. First Melvin had to pass muster with Joseph Dolphin, a stalwart of the Yiddish theater who was the summer social director of the Butler. Once hired, the teenager was obliged to perform all kinds of menial tasks as a busboy, waiter, and swimming pool and rowboat attendant ("Mrs. Bloom, if you don't bring that rowboat in, by God, you'll never see another one!"). For that the teenager was paid a munificent sum on the order of $8 weekly. Meanwhile, he watched for any opportunity in the weekend programs. Everyone on the staff thought of themselves as tummlers, from the Yiddish word tummel, meaning "make a noise." The Yiddish lexicographer Leo Rosten defined the consummate hotel tummler as an individual forever traversing the grounds and buildings of a vacation spot, "in an uninterrupted exhibition of joking, jollying, baiting, burlesquing, heckling and clowning to force every paying customer to have fun."
new kid was hardly the tummler-in-chief of the Butler Lodge, although he did as much as could be expected of a young employee. His daily routine included stimulating the logy vacationers after a heavy lunch as they lolled around the pool. He’d don a derby and alpaca coat (props in a suspicious number of his anecdotes) and “go to the diving board with two heavy suitcases and I’d say, ‘Business is bad, I don’t want to live’ and I’d jump in the pool and everyone would laugh.” (His rescuer in these anecdotes was “often a tall, blond Gentile,” another biographer, James Robert Parish, noted.) On occasion the teenager visited the Avon Lodge, where Don Appell introduced him to a recent high school graduate, not yet eighteen, named Sidney Caesar, who played sax in the house band. Appell had noticed Caesar’s knack for mugging and quipping and found parts for him in his busy slate of staged drama, comedy, and revues for Avon guests. Six foot two with lush dark blond hair and the shoulders of a lifeguard, “Sid” didn’t look like the usual Jewish boy from Yonkers. Years later, writer Mel Tolkin, who met Caesar when they worked together on their first television show, Admiral Broadway Revue, said Caesar looked so goyish it took him a while to realize that they were coreligionists. Younger than Caesar by four years and shorter by six or eight inches, Melvin was instantly smitten by such a physical specimen. “Sid was the Apollo of the mountains, the best-looking guy since silent movies,” Brooks recollected in one interview. “He would stretch himself out on a rock near the lake and we’d all stand and look at him.” At the time they had only a passing acquaintance, but Caesar was magnetic as a performer and Melvin noted his impressive saxophone jazz work in the band as well as his cavorting in smallish parts in the Saturday-night entertainments staged by Appell. Those varied from a cycle of Clifford Odets dramas, performed reverently, to radio comedy skits with everyone standing around onstage reading into microphones. This time and place may be where a certain factoid originates: that Mel Brooks entered show business with a walk-on in an Odets play, according to some early published reports, or with bit roles in Counterattack and Junior Miss, according to other accounts listing Brooks’s first stage appearances in the Catskills. Many Borscht Belt hotels staged similar established fare, and Joseph Dolphin’s playbook at the Butler was also ambitious. The teenager did attain one milestone that summer, landing his first big break at the Butler. Dolphin was directing Uncle Harry, written by Thomas Job, a melodrama involving a small-town perfect crime gone awry; Job’s play was inching toward its Broadway premiere in 1942 (it would be filmed as The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry in 1945). One of Uncle Harry’s pivotal characters was the governor, who at the climax considers a reprieve of the convicted killer. A summer member of the troupe, playing the governor, took ill and had to be replaced for one performance. Melvin, who like all the staff was an understudy and walk-on, knew the lines and waved his hand to volunteer. The nervous fourteen-year-old was garbed in “gray wig, gray beard, period clothes,” he later recalled. In the final minutes of the play Uncle Harry, shaking with emotion, confesses to the governor, hoping to save his innocent sister from hanging for his crime. The governor hands Uncle Harry a glass of water, telling him to drink it and calm himself. “The glass slips out of my hand and breaks,” as Brooks told the tale, “the water goes all over the desk and stage, and I’m mortified. I don’t know what to do. So I walk down to the floodlights, and I say to the audience, ‘Hey, this is my first job as an actor, I’m really only 14,’ and I take off my wig and beard, and the audience gets hysterical.” “Joe Dolphin,” Brooks finished, embellishing the anecdote with details that would make it even more colorful, as was his lifelong wont, “leaped on the stage in a rage, I think he had a knife in his hand, and he chased me through three Catskills resorts.” Often, in subsequent interviews, Brooks explained why, dating from his youth, he had felt impelled toward a life of comedy. “You hear about the people who become comedians because they had unhappy childhoods,” he said repeatedly, “but a lot of us go into it
for the opposite reason. We got so much adoration and love and attention that when we left the nests and didn’t get it we started to ask, ‘Where is it, the throwing in the air?’” By high school the throwing in the air had evanesced. Gradually leaving behind the little world of his automatically supportive family, the teenager discovered unhappiness in what he sorely missed, lacked, envied, or felt deprived of. The needs and anxieties, fears, hostilities, and resentments would fuel and sharpen his comedy. If he had ever been happy-go-lucky, that changed after his first Catskills summer. By 1940, no longer was Melvin such an adorable puppy. He noticed taller, handsomer people and felt short and ugly. In later interviews he frequently gave his height as five feet, seven inches, which is not really that short. But any height can be psychologically short, and a person who adds knives and desperate chases to anecdotes also might add inches to his height. The youngest Kaminsky brother was already the tallest, taller than Irving, Lenny, and Bernie. But outside the little world of his family he was not tall and handsome. Nor was he an athlete, and much of his psychology was formed around what he was not. Although he was okay at sports, he did not enjoy the same athletic reputation as his brothers; repeatedly in interviews Brooks complained about being picked last for sports teams. He became a “court jester” to the jocks, he said, chronologically his first acknowledgment of that role. Wearing the fool’s cap only added to his bitterness, however. “Pretty soon, I came to hate them [the jocks] all. I really hated them for what they made me be.” A nonathlete was no babe magnet, and Melvin wasn’t a Romeo, either. For one thing, Kitty didn’t discuss the facts of life with him. “Never,” Brooks told Playboy with unusual candor on the subject in 1975. “Completely taboo.” He had his “first affair” on the roof of 365 South 3rd around the start of high school. But “there was never any unzipping,” he said, “everything in pants, in dresses, never showing. Just a lot of pain and torture. Going home and unable to walk. Struggling into your bed and crying. Terrible. And it’s hard to masturbate because your brothers are in bed with you. You’re in between Bernie and Lenny, and four in the morning even Lenny looked pretty good!” In many ways Mel Brooks’s screen comedies would be suffused with a young teenage boy’s sensibility, and what passes for sexual byplay in his films was usually leering and naughty with little actual nudity or sex. There’d never be more than a mock romance in a Brooks film—with the exception of My Favorite Year, which Brooks produced but did not write or direct—the exception for tenderness and in other regards. After his summer in the Catskills, in the fall of 1940, Melvin joined the freshman class at Abraham Lincoln High School, a half mile from home in Brighton Beach. “Roughly a year,” Brooks said of his stint at Lincoln. “Did well there.” That included joining the school band and learning to play drums, a move inspired by Borscht Belt combos such as Sid Caesar’s. It helped that the Kaminskys lived around the corner from the Rich family and that Bernard “Buddy” Rich, who drummed in Bunny Berigan’s and Artie Shaw’s big bands, was the older brother of Mickey Rich, another Lincoln high schooler. When Buddy Rich came home to visit, practicing on a spare drum set in the basement, the neighborhood kids flocked around to watch the famous musician, and fourteen-year-old Melvin got pointers: one time he said Rich taught him drumming “for six months”; more likely, as he said another time, it was “half a lesson” or “rudimentary paradiddles.” Just as important, Rich invited his brother and friends to Shaw’s recording sessions in Manhattan, launching Brooks’s lifelong habit of haunting music studios. The Kaminskys still lived frugally (his mother served coffee to friends in yahrzeit glasses, he told interviewers, and tea in jelly jars). But long before he entered high school the family had acquired a radio, a big wooden Philco. The brothers squabbled and fought to control the dial. In boyhood Melvin was an unabashed fan of The Lone Ranger and Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, but he also listened to comedy programs, especially Jack Benny and Fred Allen, The Yiddish Philosopher
and The Eddie Cantor Show (“very influential on my work,” he recalled, “along with his timing was [Cantor’s] particular delivery. He took his time, didn’t rush.”). In time he added big-band music to his enthusiasms. Asked to list his ten favorite recordings for the BBC’s Desert Island Discs in 1978, Brooks named “one of my favorite swing recordings,” Cole Porter’s “Begin the Beguine”; he specified the Artie Shaw Orchestra version, which was popularized around the time the Kaminskys took up quarters in Brighton Beach. Drumming would come in handy down the road; improving his musicianship opened up a means of income for the teenager, and drumming also helped him hone his nascent comedy skills. Drumming had a lot in common with achieving the proper joke-telling rhythm, he often told interviewers. “Some punch lines should be on the offbeat,” he’d say, “they shouldn’t be right on the beat because they’ll sour. There’s a thing called syncopation, in which you feature the offbeat instead of the beat itself. The offbeat is the after-beat. And you wait, and hit it on the after-beat. So I was a real big fan of syncopation and it carried on into my movies—into my writing and my direction.”

On television talk shows in years to come, Brooks would guide the house drummer into a rim shot—which The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Playing Drums defines as simultaneously striking the rim and head of a snare drum, creating a sound that is “part normal snare and part loud, woody accent”—accentuating the punch lines of his jokes. When school let out for the summer in June 1941, fifteen-year-old Melvin returned to the Butler Lodge, this time appearing in “the first sketch I ever wrote” for one of the Saturday theatricals. He persuaded a young female staffer to walk out from the wings and join him in the center of the stage for the debut of Mel Brooks–style comedy:

He: I am a masochist.
She: I am a sadist.
He: Hit me.
(She does, very hard in the face.)
He: Wait a minute, wait a minute, hold it. I think I’m a sadist.

Don Appell and Sid Caesar were still knocking around in nearby Catskills venues, and after the summer Appell made another crucial connection for the teenager, hooking him up after school hours with the low-level impresario Benjamin F. Kutcher. Melvin ran errands and handed out flyers for Kutcher, formerly a photographer and theatrical agent in Philadelphia. Now operating out of a modest office in the theater district, Kutcher booked music acts including the jazz pianist-singer Hazel Scott and the Mexican balladeer Tito Guízar. Kutcher invested money in little theater while dreaming of Broadway hits. According to Brooks, Kutcher wore a “charcoal-gray thick Alpaca coat” and a felt homburg in all weathers, hung laundry in his office, and slept on the office couch, with cans of Bumble Bee tuna stacked beneath it. Upon that couch he seduced rich elderly women who showed their gratitude by writing checks to bankroll his disparate ventures. “I was his sixteen-year-old assistant, his Man Thursday (I wasn’t important enough to be his Friday),” Brooks recalled. “He had about one hundred little old ladies in the New York area. Once I blundered in on him and said, ‘Sorry I caught you with the old lady.’ And he said, ‘Thank you Mr. Tact.’”—an exchange that would find its way into the scene where Leo Bloom meets Max Bialystock in The Producers. Although Kutcher would inspire the character of Bialystock, he was probably not a seedy type, and there is no way to know if he really dallied with numerous white-haired lady investors. Kutcher’s many interests included opera, black music and theater, and serious message drama. That was his connection with Appell, who still wore his social conscience on his sleeve and who, in the spring of 1940 in a Greenwich Village showcase, played a lawyer defending a Negro accused of rape. Kutcher was one backer. By the fall of 1941, the Kaminskys had shifted back to Williamsburg, moving into 111 Lee Avenue, less than a mile south of their former South 3rd Street neighborhood. “I think my mother missed her mother and her friends,” Brooks explained later. But relocating also made it easier for Kitty’s youngest son to attend Eastern District High School, one of Brooklyn’s oldest and finest comprehensive schools, which was located on Marcy Avenue between Keap and
Rodney. Two of his brothers had graduated from Eastern District, including Bernie, who was out of school by the time Melvin joined the tenth grade. The sophomore class of roughly 450 students reflected the evolving demographics of Williamsburg. Still predominantly Jewish, since Melvin’s birth in 1926 Eastern District had added a liberal sprinkling of Italians and blacks to the student body (there was even a Negro Culture Club). The curriculum promoted writing, dance, music, and graphic arts over sports. Eulalie Spence, an actress and playwright from the West Indies, who had been a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance involved with W.E.B. Du Bois’s Krigwa Players, ran the drama program. (An earlier student, Joseph Papp, had sung in the Eastern District Glee Club, acted in the school’s Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and served as president of its Dramatic Society; Papp, who went on to found New York’s Public Theater, credited the drama coach from the West Indies, Spence, as “having the greatest influence on me than any teacher’s had.”) Melvin continued steady in math and the sciences while showing aptitude and a good pronunciation in French; in other classes he mainly got by. After Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, when the United States entered World War II, aviation fever swept the nation, and Kitty pushed for him to switch to a technical school—the Herron High School for Aviation in Manhattan. He tested the waters, joining Eastern District’s Aviation Club, aka the “Balsa Bugs,” and with a pal went up in a biplane for his maiden fly-round at Brooklyn’s Floyd Bennett Field. The teenager crafted one of his first songs for the occasion (“We’re a bunch of Balsa Bugs, Balsa Bugs are we . . .”), but he also vomited during the flight and afterward said no to aviation. At home, his brother Irving stuck up for him and told their mother, “This kid is special. We have got to give him a chance.” Instead Kitty bought Melvin a set of drums, and he began to play at weddings and bar mitzvahs and on subway platforms, he claimed later, with a small unit dubbed Melvin Brooks and the Wife Beaters. Chronologically, this is the first appearance of “Brooks” in his life story—his mother’s maiden name shortened with the addition of an “s” for professional purposes. The change had been necessary, he often said in interviews, because the longer words “Kaminsky” and “Brookman” did not fit on the front head of his bass drum. He didn’t say that many Jewish immigrants to the United States anglicized their surnames to make them sound “less Jewish” and “more American.” As Carl Reiner once explained forthrightly, with the change from Kaminsky to Brooks his friend Mel had “made himself more Gentile.” Mel’s own brother Irving eventually changed his surname to Kaye. Although Brooks could rattled off the Wife Beaters (“two Italians, two Jews, and me”), the local press contains no record of their performances. The most important thing, though, may have been the band’s summer engagement at the Butler Lodge before Melvin’s senior year in high school, when the veteran comic headliner took ill. The drummer, who knew all the routines, took the microphone for the next show. Later Brooks told many variations of this milestone: how he had aped the veteran comic’s clichés (“You can’t keep Jews in jail, they eat the lox!”) while improvising his own permutations. Already he had developed the habit of borrowing from and tweaking other people’s most entertaining bits, a penchant that would sustain him in his future as a comedy writer, performer, and filmmaker. Comics stole from other comics all the time, reinventing the jokes as their own; there was a very long and contentious tradition of theft in the comedy profession. The teenager also imitated the proprietor of the Butler Lodge, Pincus Cohen, and a hotel maid who, after accidentally locking herself in a room, had screamed her panic in a mockable dialect. He may or may not have hung a star on his dressing room door after his debut as a stand-up comic, as he claimed in one interview; he may or may not, at that time, have introduced his signature song (“Please love . . . Melvin Brooks!”). His debut as a funnyman was less than auspicious, and the true headliner returned after his recovery. Melvin’s presence was certainly underwhelming in the arts programs on offer.
at Eastern District High School. His high school years, 1941–44, are something of a black hole in his résumé. Official records, including the high school newspaper and the complete yearbook for his senior year, cannot be found in any archives. His senior class portrait surfaced decades later in the New York Times, courtesy of a classmate, and under his jacket-and-tie photograph were listed these activities: Class Day Committee, Senior Council, Dean's Assistant, and (following his brothers’ example) the Fencing Team. His future ambition, according to the caption adorning his senior class photograph: “Kaminsky—To be President of the U.S.” But such captions under the names of classmates were often intended as jibes, and that is probably the more accurate reading. His teachers did not spare the rod, he often said in interviews. “The class would laugh and I’d get hit. But by then I’d be laughing so hard I couldn’t stop. Slapped, grabbed by the hair, down to the principal’s office, couldn’t stop laughing,” he recalled. He was the class clown, he said more than once. But not officially: he was not mentioned among the forty honors accorded to graduating classmates, ranging from “Brightest” and “Personality Plus” to “Best All-Round” and “Best Class Writers.” Over time few classmates have come forward with colorful reminiscences about Melvin. No evidence exists that he had the slightest involvement in Eulalie Spence’s vaunted dramatic society. Most likely he kept to himself and his small circle, at least one of whom—Mark Nelson, whom James Robert Parish tracked down for his 2007 biography of Brooks—noted that his friend was “always on. Mel really commanded an audience. He mesmerized all the boys. But it was only the boys, the girls never paid him much attention.” From the point of view of most of his classmates, while at Eastern District Melvin Kaminsky was—in the words of Lester Persky, another graduate of the class of ’44 who went on to produce such films as Taxi Driver and Shampoo—“the class shmendrick.” Maybe high school plays just weren’t cool and Melvin had set his sights higher, circling the theater district, seeing every show for which he could wangle tickets, breathing the same rarefied air as Benjamin Kutcher and Don Appell. Just before joining the army in the spring of 1944, he may even have gone before the footlights, fleetingly, on Broadway. Appell had returned from military service by the spring and was hovering backstage during rehearsals for a new show called Bright Boy. Preparing to direct his first Broadway play, Career Angel, Appell would pluck several cast members from Bright Boy, a prep school drama, after the show closed within two weeks. Bright Boy’s first-time producer was David Merrick; its director was Arthur J. Beckhard, who resided in frowsy hotels and seduced aspiring actresses. “A somewhat disreputable Broadway ‘character,’” roly-poly with a soup-strainer mustache, Beckhard became another “model for Max Bialystock” for a certain Brooklyn teenager helping out backstage at the Playhouse Theatre, according to drama critic and Merrick biographer Howard Kissel. One of Bright Boy’s lead juveniles, Carleton Carpenter—who was among those who segued into Career Angel—recalled a teenager who may have “edged onto stage” now and then. Carpenter, who went on to a lengthy Broadway and Hollywood career, said he remembered the kid, a standby, “because I always suspected him of putting thumbtacks in my shoes” as a practical joke. Melvin Kaminsky “very well may have been that kid.” Certainly he was not billed, and he exaggerated his appearance, as his army stint wound down, in the Fort Dix Post: “I had three lines, was on the stage about two minutes, what a part!” Brooks paid a return visit to the Playhouse Theatre, incidentally, when he staged the big musical number “Springtime for Hitler” there for The Producers. And Liam Dunn was an actor in the cast of Bright Boy, playing one of the prep school professors. Brooks always remembered Dunn fondly and reached back to cast the veteran character actor in several later comedies, starting with the sanctimonious Reverend Johnson in Blazing Saddles.
Brooks for billing purposes, he embraced his Jewish religion and heritage on a deeper level. World War II disrupted the entire world, but it also rocked the little world of his family. The Selective Training and Service Act conscripted Leonard among Brooklyn’s first sixty draftees in late 1940, and soon after Pearl Harbor and the United States’ subsequent declaration of war, Leonard started aviation training in Texas. The next year, Irving, who could have been deferred because he was still in college and also working to support his dependent mother, enlisted in the Signal Corps. Bernard joined the army soon after his twentieth birthday in early 1943, leaving Melvin home alone with Kitty. Seventeen-year-old Melvin was in his senior year in early November 1943, when Leonard, an engineer/gunner in the waist of a B-17 Flying Fortress, took part in a large force of US heavy bombers dispatched from Britain over northwest Germany and Austria. During a raid on a German Messerschmitt factory at Wiener Neustadt near Vienna, as enemy planes assailed the bombers, Leonard’s machine gun jammed. At a height of some five miles and in a temperature of thirty-two degrees below zero Fahrenheit, his hands froze “almost immediately,” the Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported, “as he knew they would. His fingers swelled to twice their normal size and the skin of his hands stuck to the steel as he worked. But he repaired the gun and went back into action.” Shot down during a similar air battle over Austria six months later, Leonard was first reported as missing in action, then described as a prisoner being held in an unknown location. Jews in US uniform bore an H for Hebrew on their military IDs, noting their religious preference, but many, like Leonard, ripped their dog tags off before possible capture to lessen the threat of torture or removal to a concentration camp under Adolf Hitler’s anti-Semitic regime. Leonard remained a POW for the duration of the war. Hitler, World War II, and his brothers’ exemplary military service bolstered the Jewishness that, although firmly rooted in the family, Melvin had largely taken for granted. A synagogue had sponsored his time at Camp Sussex, and a mezuzah always hung by the Kaminskys’ front door. Kitty’s mother, Minnie, was omnipresent on the Sabbath, a handkerchief over her head, lighting the candles, reciting the blessings. But ironically—for a comedian later famous for wearing his Jewishness on his sleeve—the Kaminskys were secular religionists. Melvin’s Jewish upbringing was “very Reformed,” he noted in interviews. Kitty might pore over the Yiddish-language Jewish Daily Forward, but there were no anecdotes of her scrutinizing the Torah. Nor did the boys frequent shul. “I went for a little while” with his brothers, Brooks recalled. “About forty-five minutes. They told us religious life was important, so we bought what they told us. We faked it, nodded like we were praying. Learned enough Hebrew to get through a bar mitzvah.” The capture of Leonard sealed Melvin’s determination to follow his brothers into the army, and he enlisted in April, the week Leonard made headlines as missing in action somewhere in Europe. Melvin was tested for intelligence, and it says something about his aptitude—not reflected in his high school grades—that he was promptly channeled into the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), which was intended to develop the technical skills of junior officers and personnel. In early May he was sent to the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), located in Lexington, Virginia, about sixty miles east of the West Virginia border. Skipping his formal high school graduation ceremony, the new VMI student arrived in time for D-Day (June 6) and his eighteenth birthday (June 26). “I knew what Hitler was doing to Jews, so I really did feel this was a proper and just war,” he said later. “I could have gotten out of it but I was gung ho to be a soldier.” Listening to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the radio—FDR, in fireside chats, spoke fervently about the war as the battleground of civilization—also affected him. “For years I thought Roosevelt was Jewish,” Brooks said. “No kidding. I mean the Nazis called him a Jew bastard, right? I loved him. I thought of him as my father.” Popularly known as the “West Point of the South,” the Virginia Military Institute was one of dozens of US colleges
training Army Specialized Training Program soldiers alongside their regular pupils. ASTP recruits, some 348 strong arriving at VMI that May, wore their army uniforms, while the VMI “rats” were clad in traditional gray. Dining on rations in the mess halls, the ASTP soldiers underwent twelve-week cycles of classroom instruction that included traditional cadet drills and skills—saber use and horsemanship—along with a grounding in civil, electrical, and mechanical engineering. One local perk was invitations to the cotillions sprinkled with chaperones and “the flowers of Virginia,” in Brooks’s words. “The most beautiful girls, Southern belles,” he recalled, “but I was just this Jew from New York and not so good-looking.” In Brooklyn, he had encountered anti-Semitic taunts from gangs of young toughs when, a few times, he had ventured into Gentile fiefdoms. While standing in the commissary line at VMI, however, a fellow serviceman growled, “Come on, you dirty Jew, move it!” Melvin lunged at the GI, swinging his mess kit, and was dragged off to quarantine, as he recalled, until a lieutenant asked for his side of the story and released him with a caution. Melvin was proud of being “a tough Jew from Brooklyn.” By the first of August, Melvin had completed his twelve-week orientation, and then, partly because the ASTP was being phased out nationally, he was transferred to Fort Sill, a longtime army installation the size of a small city located near Lawton, Oklahoma, about eighty-five miles southwest of Oklahoma City. A headquarters for officer and artillery training, Fort Sill groomed fresh army troops to support infantry advances in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. At Fort Sill, Melvin Kaminsky, along with thousands of other raw GIs, received his standard-issue supplies, a buzz haircut, and vaccinations. He underwent eight weeks of basic physical training for toughening up, followed by, in his case, another eight weeks of schooling in combat engineering practices, which would prepare him for the post–D-Day infusion of US personnel into Europe that loomed on the horizon. The Oklahoma weather was blistering. A mere cog in the army, Melvin didn’t make the Lawton Constitution or Fort Sill Army News. He kept his head down, marching to the refrain “Beans, beans, the musical fruit! The more you eat, the more you toot!” while chuckling at the signs proclaiming the Field Artillery Replacement Training Center: F.A.R.T.C. “Somewhere in my head I said, ‘I will. I will use this.'” he later recalled. “You know, because it was too crazy. It was all over the place. You saw F.A.R.T. everywhere at Fort Sill and I said, ‘Don’t they know this? Can’t they see this?’” Anywhere west of Brooklyn was “John Wayne country,” the way he saw it, and Virginia and Oklahoma were his first far-flung adventures. But Oklahoma was too far away; it got him down. As the Waco Kid (Gene Wilder) asks Black Bart (Cleavon Little) in Blazing Saddles, “What’s a dazzling urbanite like you doing in a rustic setting like this?” Cheering themselves up as much as their audience (Brooks recalled that he felt like a fish out of water, “near suicidal,” at Fort Sill), he and another displaced urbanite performed an Army Club skit lampooning the differences between East Coast sophisticates and heartland rubes. Just as in Brooklyn, the army recruit roamed far and freely whenever he could slip the leash, including to Dallas, Texas, two hundred miles southeast of Sill, where the nightlife beckoned. Dallas felt like “Brooklyn-in-the-West,” Brooks recalled. “Every weekend,” he said. “It was great. It was still foreign to me. It was still Texas. But it was a big jump from Oklahoma in terms of elegance and sophistication. So Dallas was important to me every weekend for four months.” In December, the Fort Sill soldiers were packed onto a train, the windows blacked out to minimize any fifth-column surveillance; they headed east to Fort Dix, New Jersey, near Trenton. While waiting for overseas orders, Melvin could visit his mother and friends in Brooklyn. The Battle of the Bulge, the German counteroffensive against Allied forces, was bogging down in the hilly, densely forested Ardennes, located primarily in Belgium and Luxembourg but stretching into eastern France and southern Germany. The reinforcements would not depart the United States until
midwinter, transported on troop ships carrying upward of eight thousand servicemen, the officers in staterooms and the enlisted men quartered in the hold and cramped bottom decks. Through rough winter seas the convoy-guarded ships zigzagged across the Atlantic, avoiding enemy threat. Most of the ships were routed from Bermuda around UK-friendly Northern Ireland, a ten- or twelve-day trip ending with Red Cross doughnuts and coffee in Liverpool. Upon landfall, Melvin and the other soldiers were crammed into a train, making stops across the English countryside, including at Nottingham, the mythical home of Robin Hood—the future subject of a Mel Brooks comedy—before grinding to a halt at Southampton port. By the time they crossed the English Channel to Le Havre, France, arriving sometime in early February 1945, the fiercest battles in the Ardennes had concluded, Germany was in retreat and fighting rearguard actions, and the winter temperatures had turned frigid. Briefly Melvin Kaminsky was pressed into duties as a forward observer/radio operator, helping to call in aerial support for the advancing forces, but soon he and his unit were handed daily assignments as part of the 1104th Engineer Combat Group. The 1104th was attached to the 78th Infantry Division, one of multiple divisions and numerous battalions, both US and British troops, under command of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, which joined together the soldiers of both countries in the drive to the Rhine River. The combat engineers were tasked with rebuilding mountain roads and supply routes in the rugged Ardennes terrain, which had gone to pieces under dismal weather and the constant pounding of artillery and trucks. They erected vehicular bridges and footbridges across the Roer and lesser rivers; tore out wire barriers and cleared minefields; removed rubble and demolitions and destroyed German pillboxes to assist forward movement. By late March, moving closely with the assault forces, the 1104th crossed the Rhine and marched with the main army toward northern Germany, from Magdeburg to Goslar in the Harz Mountains, a grueling advance of more than two hundred miles in fourteen days, during which time Brooks and the 1104th were reposted multiple times. The work was dangerous, especially early in the advance. From June 11, 1944, to May 8, 1945, when the 1104th Engineer Combat Group entered the hostilities on the continent, 329 engineers were slain and hundreds more wounded. Dozens of Bronze and Silver Stars were bestowed on the 1104th for gallant action against the enemy. Death, destruction, and a constant atmosphere of fear surrounded Melvin Kaminsky. The daily news and talk among the GIs revolved around the common goal to vanquish Hitler and his hate-filled Nazi regime. Brooks said his character was forged when a bomb hit his unit one day and he crouched under a desk, debris tumbling all around him. He thought, “Okay, if I get through this, I’ll get through anything.” The end was in sight. Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945, less than two months after the 1104th landed at Le Havre. May 8 was V-E Day. Brooks spent the momentous occasion holed up in a wine cellar in a small town in western Germany, pickled in May wine. Long-serving veterans were promptly demobilized, but the Brooklynite would stay in uniform for almost another year and remain in Germany. That lost year is but one of the intriguing gaps in Mel Brooks’s early life. In numerous later interviews, he reminisced about his World War II experiences, often recounting an anecdote about the night he had heard German music wafting from entrenched lines and in response imitated Al Jolson at the top of his lungs, aiming his “Toot, Toot, Tootsie (Goo’bye!)” across no-man’s-land toward the enemy. Another favorite story told of the Camel cigarettes Melvin stuffed into his ears (“I might be the first man to die of emphysema of the inner ear”) to muffle the constant thudding of trucks and bombs. Although Brooks later said his unit had been “fired on by a lot of kids and old men who were left in the villages,” not in any interview did he say he had witnessed any fatalities. Under “Battle and Campaigns” on his discharge papers is plainly typed “NONE.” Under “Wounds Received in Action,” also “NONE.” Under “Decorations
and Citations” are listed a “Good Conduct Medal,” “American Campaign Medal,” “EAME Campaign Medal,” and “World War II Victory Medal”—all standard issue for dutiful GIs. In books, articles, oral histories, and official documents, there are as few sightings of him in the army and World War II as fond reminiscences by his high school classmates. That personal lack of colorful wartime incident might have inhibited him when he considered, in the 1970s, making a semiautobiographical film about World War II, a combat comedy with Dom DeLuise and Marty Feldman as wacky tail gunners. Yet if he was a shmendrick in high school, in the army he helped make a difference alongside millions of fellow shmendricks. Melvin bonded with his unit, contributed to the push for victory, and in later years often took time to revisit northern France, where the 1104th had been billeted. He’d collaborate with Ronny Graham on a funny song called “Retreat,” with lyrics that encapsulated his attitude: “Run away!/Run away!/ If you run away you live to fight another day!” A half century later, nearing ninety, he’d don his old full-dress uniform with medals for the documentary GI Jews, reciting his serial number automatically and recalling his World War II service with bittersweet pride. In Hitler and the Nazis he found lifelong nemeses, and he’d channel “that molten ball of hatred for Nazis and Hitler” into his comedy. The army hardened him physically, made him tough and wiry, and added a layer of outer shell to his personality. But he also admitted to having suffered “a lot of conscious and unconscious frustration and hatred” during his time in uniform. In the end, opportunistically, the war assisted his professional goals. Already the “barracks character,” in his words, shortly after the war officially ended in Europe Melvin Kaminsky migrated into the Special Services branch of the army, which produced entertainment of every sort and variety for servicemen in the German encampments. The German section had its hands full after the armistice because such a huge number of soldiers remained behind for rebuilding and occupation. Reassigned to the 1262nd Service Command Unit, Kaminsky was reclassified as not a writer, playwright, or artist, three of the four categories, but “entertainment specialist.” One of his jobs was squiring around visitors such as the army comedian Harvey Stone or even bigger celebrities. “Every time Bob Hope came by,” Brooks recalled, he sat up close to “write down all his jokes and use them.” The GI from Brooklyn grabbed at Hope’s pants cuff, pleading for an autograph as the star tried to exit the stage after one performance near Wiesbaden in August 1945. Brooks reminded Hope of that encounter when they crossed paths backstage years later on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show. According to his Separation Qualification Record, Brooks scheduled the touring entertainment supplied by the United Service Organizations (USO) and also the amateur productions staged by servicemen. He “directed shows for military personnel. Wrote dialogue . . . acted in capacity of master of ceremonies and comedian during presentation of shows. Arranged schedules of dance orchestra[s] for musical revues and concerts.” Many army shows were vaudeville-type revues featuring GIs in skits, with singing and dancing. While it was too soon for the entertainment specialist to think of Bob Hope as any kind of role model, by the end of his time overseas Melvin Kaminsky, though still just a private, rose to noncommissioned officer in charge of Special Services, serving under a sergeant and lieutenant, producing big events for the officers’ clubs and entire divisions. He was furnished with a Mercedes-Benz for transportation, he later boasted, and “a German fiddle player named Helga” as his “chauffeuse.” With a special pass to Frankfurt, he obtained “certain rare cognacs” and indulged in even rarer, admitted debauchery. “There wasn’t a nineteen-year-old soldier who got drunker than I did,” he recalled. The noncommissioned officer in charge increasingly took the stage himself, introducing acts or making patter. He donned a German uniform and toothbrush mustache to offer his first public impersonation of Hitler, screaming unintelligible “Deutsch.” By the time Melvin Kaminsky returned to the United States in April 1946, he had
been promoted to “head of the entertainment crew for Special Services” for the army’s main separation center at Fort Dix in New Jersey. The former combat engineer was a familiar emcee of the Fort Dix shows he organized, telling jokes between the acts and parodying popular songs, including a version of Cole Porter’s “Begin the Beguine” that was bound to resonate with his audience ("When you begin/To clean the latrine . . ."). “Nothing frightened me,” he recalled. “I sang like Al Jolson. Everybody could do the low Jolson, but I did the high Jolson . . .”

With “two friends,” according to William Holtzman’s dual biography of Brooks and Anne Bancroft, Melvin also “wowed the troops with a raunchy rendition of the Andrews Sisters—Patti, LaVerne, and Maxine—in army drab and five o’clock shadow.” Consciously or otherwise, the soldier absorbed comedy lessons that he would bring to his filmmaking years later. “I had a wide audience from all over the country,” he explained, “so I had to find enough ubiquitous stuff to make them all laugh, enough universal ideas. It helped me a lot in forming my own kind of humor.”

On the base he billed himself as the “atomic comedian,” according to the first known profile of the Special Services entertainer in the Fort Dix Post. A series of photographs in the Post showed a wildly mugging “first sergeant” displaying the same array of funny faces he’d proffer throughout his career: “Determination” (sporting a steel helmet, gritting his teeth); “Man of the World” (a zany look, half effete, half doltish); “Happiness” (a toothy grin); and “Confusion” (crossed eyes and lolling tongue). Already his own best salesman, the first sergeant himself arranged the Post publicity, hired the photographer, and later passed out the one-sheet when applying for show business jobs. Importantly, by the end of the war he’d also officially chosen his stage name: “Melvyn Brooks,” according to the Post. (The “y” would come and go over the next few years.)

The “atomic” side of the nascent comedian reflected the tensions of his personality: at times his humor was too explosive, belligerent, or crude. At least one campmate thought that too many of Brooks's onstage jokes landed with a thud, a problem sometimes in the years ahead, too. Close up and personal, he was usually funnier. “In the barracks there was a funny guy,” recalled infantryman Stanley Kaplan. “Terrible as a comedian, but around the barracks he was very funny”—so funny that Kaplan, a budding comic strip artist, borrowed off-kilter ideas from Brooks for his cartoons. “He would jump from footlocker to footlocker acting like an ape, swing from the rafters, and make up the most fantastic images and stories. I thought this guy is funny!”

Elevated to the rank of corporal just before his discharge, the newly christened Melvyn Brooks was released from the army on June 27, 1946, just one day before celebrating his twentieth birthday. His discharge records show him at five feet, three and a half inches and 125 pounds. The war, which he had entered as a high school graduate, reshaped him like a bullet. Now he was a man. Probably he had lost his virginity somewhere in Europe. One anecdote he told friends was about “the time he was approached by a comely French hooker,” in William Holtzman’s words, “with the businesslike query: ‘Fuck, no?’” Brooks would evade probing sexual interrogatories by the press later in his career, but he did say, once, that he preferred dark-haired women, but not Jewish princesses and not the busty, cartoonish shiksas that cropped up in his films as joke fodder. He told Playboy that he relished “dirty” lovemaking. “Only when it’s dirty and when there’s a lot of yelling and cursing and filth and all the other things that I thought were taboo—then it’s very sexy and very hot for me.” (Albeit any kind of lovemaking, clean or dirty, would be sparse in his films.)

Upon release, his ambitions recharged, Brooks launched himself back into show business with a gig as social director at his old summer stomping grounds, the Butler Lodge, according to Charles Cohen, whose family operated the Catskills resort. He may have hopscotched around several area resorts in the summer of 1946, as he performed as a stand-up comic, drawing on Joe Miller’s Joke Book (“Puns, Quips, Gags and Jokes”) and what had clicked in Special Services. Hearing
something he liked, Brooks would throw it into the repertoire. His act was heavy on impersonations: giving the audience his solemn Thomas Jefferson (striking a rigid, statesmanlike pose); his Cagney—not Jimmy Cagney—but “Jimmy Cagney’s Aunt Hilda”; and his Man of a Thousand Faces (“. . . and now ‘Face 27!’”), which took up where the Fort Dix Post’s rubber faces left off. That summer of 1946 was probably when the future illustrator and graphic designer Bob Gill, leading a small house band at a Sullivan County resort, saw the act of the twenty-year-old “atomic comedian.” On his own, Brooks was still an acquired taste and not clearly destined for greatness. “He slept in one dressing room just off the stage,” Gill said, “and my trio slept in the other one. I remember thinking he was not very funny.” His act was sprinkled with imitative songs, and Al Jolson was almost as much of an obsession for Brooks, in his salad days, as was Adolf Hitler. But probably he performed his own original, amusing, and oddly touching signature song for the first time in the army before taking it to the Catskills that summer. The song ended à la Jolson with Brooks on bended knee. The number became enshrined in his career repertoire. More than one journalist in the years ahead, when he burst into the song during interviews, agreed with the Saturday Evening Post reporter who described it, in 1978, as “a pithier metaphor of all he [Brooks] was and all he has become than anything anyone has ever said about him.” Here I am, I’m Melvin Brooks! I’ve come to stop the show. Just a ham who’s minus looks But in your heart I’ll grow! I’ll tell you gags, I’ll sing you songs (Just happy little snappy songs that roll along) Out of my mind. Won’t you be kind? And please love Melvin Brooks! Brooks had left the army with an inner fury never glimpsed in his anecdotes about his boyhood. Hitler, the Nazis, death, and destruction: he saw life now as a battle like those he had survived, with himself as the underdog leader of a personal mission seeking victory and vindication. Slights and drawbacks, both real and exaggerated, became increasingly crucial to his psychology, his drive and willpower, his persona, his brand of comedy. Back home with his mother in the fall, he pondered a vague future. Many veterans were signing up for college on the GI Bill. That was his mother’s wish for him. Although according to some accounts in the fall of 1946 Brooks registered at Brooklyn College, where his brother Irving had matriculated, the college has no record of his enrollment or attendance. Later, in 1947, he did turn up in a New School for Social Research course, solemnly intoning Keats and Job 28 from the Bible on a recording that was included in the DVD box set The Incredible Mel Brooks. The minute-and-a-half-long recording might have been for a night course on diction. Again, the New School has no records of him. When Brooks said he accumulated about one year of college study over time, he was inflating the two months he had spent at Virginia Military Institute. His lack of higher education always touched a nerve with him; it added to his insecurity as a writer and sympathetically explained why so many of his interviews—and interviews with his friends—insist upon his being a funnyman with the breadth and depth of an intellectual. Sitting in a classroom was not for him, and besides, what would he study? For a while he drew a regular paycheck as a courier for the US Post Office, working out of the mail department at Penn Station. His brother Lenny was now a postal clerk, working for the same employer. Yet one job was never enough for Brooks, and soon he took another position with flexible hours at Abalene Blouse & Sportswear, a retail and wholesale clothier on Seventh Avenue in the Garment District. He was a born salesman, and, he liked to boast in interviews, “I’m a better salesman than I am anything else.” Selling clothing was useful in developing his communication skills, and he didn’t have to learn the cocky, often aggressive manner of the profession, which was his natural demeanor. Beneath it all he was anxious to get something going in show business. He was acutely aware that his father, Max Brooks, had died young, the very week he turned thirty-six. To that end, in the late fall, Brooks reconnected
with Don Appell, who had established himself after military service as the playwright and director of two Broadway plays. This, Too, Shall Pass, his recent tolerance drama, told the story of a war veteran coping with anti-Semitism. The irrepressible Benjamin Kutcher was an investor, and onetime Butler Lodge social director Joseph Dolphin was involved behind the scenes. Appell brought Brooks to the Copacabana nightclub on East 60th Street early in 1947 to see the revue everyone in New York was raving about; and afterward he took him backstage to greet Sid Caesar, the saxophonist of the Avon Lodge house band back in the pre–World War II era, who had become (as the advertising proclaimed) a “comedy star.” Caesar was more than just a comedian who could mimic all kinds of funny sound effects, including involuntary bodily functions; he could sing, dance, play the saxophone; he had chameleon-like acting skills. The impresario Max Liebman had launched the strapping, charismatic performer in a Coast Guard variety show during World War II, called Tars and Spars, which was later filmed in Hollywood with Caesar making his screen debut. Even as the Copacabana revue drew crowds, Tars and Spars was still playing in theaters. The watershed moment of Brooks's career came backstage at the Copacabana when he was reunited with Caesar, who was now Caesar the budding phenomenon. Caesar remembered Brooks; they took to each other instantly with banter and joking. Realizing that fame and fortune were descending on Caesar, Brooks attached himself as a “sort of groupie,” in Caesar's words. “He was funny and ingenious and he liked my type of humor, so he hung around me.” Brooks began to visit Caesar backstage frequently at the Copacabana and Roxy, where the star headlined later in 1947, and each time Caesar opened a new show, Brooks lingered longer after the curtain rang down. Meanwhile, his old boss Benjamin Kutcher offered him a promising job for the summer of 1947. The New Jersey Atlantic shore was a summer magnet for entertainers as well as vacationers, and Kutcher planned to launch a theatrical stock company in Red Bank, a picturesque Podunk about fifty miles south of Brooklyn on the Navesink River, an estuary that flowed into the Shrewsbury River and ultimately into the Atlantic Ocean. Joseph Dolphin was on board as one of the stage directors, and Dolphin said he could work with the onetime pool boy he had chased through the Catskills with a knife. The Manhattan-based Kutcher needed a proxy in Red Bank to supervise the ambitious playbill, which promised a new show every week, supplemented with weekend magician and clown acts for children. Kutcher had leased the premises of the Mechanic Street School from the Board of Education, and downtown department stores were already selling tickets. The twenty-one-year-old veteran of Special Services would serve as Kutcher's Johnny-on-the-spot, and for the first time his name would be proclaimed as “Mel Brooks” in Red Bank Players programs and publicity. (His name fluctuated between “Mel” and “Melvin” over the next several years, but “Melvyn” was gone forever.) Brooks would manage the stock company and represent it to merchants, civic officials, and the local newspapers. He would also take the stage to introduce the shows and perform walk-ons in the plays. That summer he roomed with two young members of the troupe: an actor and aspiring comedian named Wilbur Roach and Roach’s cousin John Roney, a townie known as “Red Bank’s Barrymore,” in William Holtzman’s words. Sprinkling in Red Bank residents with an ensemble of low-wattage New York professionals, the Players opened the season in mid-June with Hell-Bent for Heaven, a Pulitzer Prize–winning melodrama from 1924 about feuding Blue Ridge Mountain clans. Things went swiftly downhill from there. The Red Bankers did not turn out in droves, and ticket prices had to be slashed. Guest celebrity performers were jettisoned, and plays were trimmed from the calendar to extend the up-and-running shows and save money. Strapped for cash, Kutcher fell behind on the Mechanic Street School rent, and then the Red Bank Board of Education—already alarmed by reports of cigarette butts and empty soda bottles strewn all over the public
grounds—tried to cancel the Players’ lease. Onstage blunders and miscues only added to the negative publicity. The curtain was so tardy one night that Roney had to take the stage in his dressing gown and wave Roach and Brooks on from the wings. The roommates improvised “with close to sixty minutes of mimicry,” William Holtzman wrote, with Roach offering an “admirable” Charles Laughton while Brooks did a “regrettable” Al Jolson that closed with his trademark song, “Mammy.” There was a gray area of authority between the stage director and the producer’s surrogate, and more than once, according to another biographer, James Robert Parish, Brooks clashed with Dolphin’s successor, director Percy Montague, who took over in midsummer. Montague tongue-lashed Brooks in front of the company for a “minor infraction,” at which Brooks “burst into a tirade filled with enough big words and erudite references to convince everyone in earshot that he was not a man to be taken lightly.”

Wilbur Roach remembered a roommate who was keen at the time on nasal Jolson impersonations and sophomoric clowning. Brooks was “flirtatious and grabby” with women, Holtzman wrote in his book, but also “awkward and almost adolescent.” Red Bank also occasioned the first glimpse of the wishful wordsmith. Brooks spent part of the summer crafting a short story, Roach recalled, “an allegory really, about two cats at opposite ends of the social ladder, one patrician, the other plebeian. When they finally come to words, the alley cat lectures the fat cat: ‘You may have this beautiful home, but I have my freedom of being able to go from trash can to trash can.’”

After their problem-plagued summer, the Players limped across the finish line in late August, barely making it to the sixth and final production of the season with Separate Rooms, a comedy revolving around the love life of a self-centered actress. A week or two before the comedy opened, director Percy Montague either quit in a pique or was fired by Kutcher. Either way, the “atomic” Mel Brooks was poised to assume the reins. The twenty-one-year-old oversaw a furious scramble of last-minute casting and rehearsal. The professionals had dwindled, but Cathy Clayton, as the self-centered actress, and John Dennis, as her man-about-town husband, had played leads all summer. Brooks’s roommates Roney and Roach took bigger parts, and so did local thespians. For himself, Brooks set aside the eighth-billed role of Scoop Davis, a press agent for the self-centered actress, his only listed role of the summer. “Not the typical blustering sort,” the script describes Scoop, “a natural comedian and a little screwy.”

With assistance from Roney and Roach, however, Brooks really “blossomed” as a director, Holtzman wrote. “If Mel’s directorial style had few niceties (he once corrected [Roach’s] interpretation of a British character: ‘Too much swish,’ neither did he have any pretensions. They were all having fun, they were experimenting and learning.”

The Asbury Park Press, reviewing the premiere of Separate Rooms, wasn’t sure how much fun the show really was, however. The largest-circulation paper in the county said the cast suffered from “a lapse of memory” and “the play lost some of its best scenes thru dialog bungling.” The production was “not up to the standards” of “earlier efforts.” Even so, for the first time that summer the turnout was strong, the applause and laughter loud. Wilbur Roach would go on to become the comedian Will Jordan, famed as an Ed Sullivan impressionist. He stayed in touch with Brooks for decades and on more than one occasion, in interviews, traced Brooks’s borrowings, especially his Hitler riffs, from Jordan’s own earliest stand-up comedy bits. John Dennis moved on to a long career in Hollywood, and his onetime Red Bank director remembered Dennis fondly, years later, by giving him some moments in Young Frankenstein and High Anxiety. Chaos fed Brooks’s energy and imagination. In war and summer stock he prevailed, and he blasted through all the obstacles, in the summer of 1947, for the Red Bank Players and himself. Was he an aspiring comedian, actor, writer, or director? All of the above? Or was he condemned to forever be a ladies’ wear salesman with colorful summer jobs? Returning in the
fall of 1947 to work at Abalene Blouse & Sportswear (which he’d “use as a stopgap when money was tight,” in Holtzman’s words), Brooks looked for the occasional gig as a comic or fill-in drummer. In one interview he said a friend recommended him once as a substitute for an ailing drummer with Charlie Spivak’s big band, which was performing at Bill Miller’s Riviera at the foot of the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, New Jersey. If true, he had just reached his pinnacle as a musician. But he had treaded water for two years since leaving the army, making only haphazard progress in his show business aspirations. His brothers, no longer such an integral part of his life, held good-paying jobs and were married now. His mother worried about her youngest son. Brooks’s answer was to move, in the fall, into a flat on Horatio Street in Greenwich Village, which had become his favorite neighborhood, sharing the modest space with another escapee from Brooklyn.

Brooks was burning with ambition by the time he visited Sid Caesar backstage in the spring of 1948, following performances of Caesar’s latest triumph, Make Mine Manhattan, a musical revue of songs and skits playing at the Broadhurst Theatre. By now Caesar’s reputation was in steep ascent. Besides Manhattan, which had been filling seats since January, Caesar boasted a new Hollywood movie, a straight melodrama, The Guilt of Janet Ames, which was playing in Times Square at the same time as his hit musical. Reviewing Make Mine Manhattan in the New York Times, Brooks Atkinson had grumbled that most of the performers were “still in the junior class” but that was not true of Caesar, for he was “the most original item in the program. An amiable product of the local habitat, he can mimic anything from a subway vending machine to a dial telephone or a taxi driver, and rush through it with tremendous speed. Mr. Caesar is imaginative and clever.”

Ever since Tars and Spars, Caesar had been under personal contract to Max Liebman, who had discovered him and paved the way to his breakthrough in the Coast Guard show. Liebman had helped devise Make Mine Manhattan and now was in talks with the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) about a television variety series to star Caesar. Brooks learned that NBC had come through with an offer for a midseason TV series, beginning early in 1949 after Manhattan would close its expected run. The live one-hour program, aired simultaneously by NBC and the Dumont Network and sponsored by Admiral, a television manufacturing company, would give Caesar a revue format similar to the one he and Liebman had developed for Tars and Spars and successive stage shows. Brooks saw Caesar as a role model for everything he dreamed of being and as the mentor who might light the path ahead for him. Caesar saw Brooks as an entertaining sidekick; Brooks’s smart-aleck remarks, his off-beat sense of humor, distracted the rising star from his many other preoccupations. Yet Caesar also had an eagle eye for talent and saw possibilities in Brooks before anyone else did. He loved pulling people into a room and calling on Brooks to sing his signature tune, “Please love Melvin Brooks!” Caesar always chortled over that song. In the last few years their friendship had really grown. Backstage at the Broadhurst, Caesar spoke about the new television series he and Liebman were planning, saying that maybe Brooks could tag along, help out with the jokes. But first Brooks would have to pass muster with Max Liebman, and at first he didn’t make the grade. A Jewish native of Vienna transplanted to Brooklyn, where he had graduated from Boys High School, Liebman was a hunched, owlish man who customarily wore a neat bow tie and a dead-animal hairpiece. (“It looked like a family of birds that just left,” Brooks said.) Born in 1902, Liebman had begun his career as a sketch writer for revues in the 1930s. Before linking up with Caesar during World War II, he was already a vaunted name in show business for having launched an array of talent, most famously Danny Kaye, out of Camp Tamiment in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. The Poconos belonged to a more politically progressive tradition than the Catskills, and Tamiment in Pike County was a resort well known for its show
business training and entertainment. For much of the 1930s and again after World War II, Liebman ran Tamiment’s theater workshop and staged the shows for its playhouse. His weekly revues blended character-driven satire with songs, pantomime, and highbrow ballet and opera. One day in the summer of 1948, Harry Kalcheim from the William Morris Agency, which represented Liebman, brought NBC executive Sylvester “Pat” Weaver to Tamiment to watch the shows and meet Liebman, setting into motion Admiral Broadway Revue, the new Liebman/Caesar series that NBC had scheduled for liftoff in January 1949. Caesar needed supporting players for the projected series, and Liebman’s hand was manifest in the casting. The two lead actresses the producer hired were Mary McCarty, a former child performer who was now a reliable character actress, and, from Tamiment, Imogene Coca, “a lovely little lady with big brown eyes,” in Caesar’s words, in whom Liebman had great confidence. Coca had starred with Danny Kaye in The Straw Hat Revue, a Liebman/Tamiment show that had been “transferred in toto” (in Liebman’s words) to Broadway back in 1940. After the success of Straw Hat, Coca had been languishing except for other Tamiment bookings. Caesar knew Coca in passing, but now, reintroduced, they clicked. “I always called [Coca] Immy because she was so little,” Caesar said. “We had chemistry right away and liked each other immediately.” Liebman also reached back to Tamiment for the team he engaged to write the Admiral Broadway Revue series. Initially the producer had put Mel Tolkin and Lucille Kallen together to write the summer camp shows. Tolkin was the senior partner not only by dint of age. Jewish, born Shmuel Tolchinsky in the Ukraine in 1913, he had been raised in Canada. An infinitely resourceful comedy writer, Tolkin was also thoughtful to the point of being angst-ridden with “more tics than a flophouse mattress,” as Larry Gelbart once described him. (The theater critic Kenneth Tynan said that Tolkin was “a harassed looking man,” while Brooks said he evoked “a stork that dropped a baby and broke it and is coming to explain to the parents.”) Kallen had also grown up in Canada, although she, too, was Jewish and a native of Los Angeles. Younger (born in 1922), Kallen was a brunette as attractive as she was brainy. She complemented Tolkin with her savvy and sensibility; she had a feminine but also feminist sensibility—“out of her guts,” in Tolkin’s words. Both had written songs as well as satirical sketches for Tamiment, as they would also do for Sid Caesar down the years. (Tolkin wrote the theme song introducing Your Show of Shows: “Stars over Broadway/See them glow . . .”) Tolkin had clocked time as a jazz pianist in nightclubs and could imitate the style of any composer, popular or classical. Kallen was Juilliard-trained as a pianist and had performed in nightclub revues. The same decidedly elaborate and sophisticated template that Liebman had developed for the Tamiment shows would be carried over to Admiral Broadway Revue—only everything would revolve around Caesar, who had never been to Tamiment. That was the plan of action as Brooks trailed Caesar to production meetings in the fall of 1948. Except that Brooks could not get past Liebman. Caesar introduced them backstage at the Broadhurst one night, urging Brooks into his signature song: “Do it for Max!” As always, Brooks went down on the close à la Jolson. Liebman was unmoved. “Who is this meshuganah?” he demanded. (“He didn’t know how right he was,” Caesar recalled.) Caesar touted Brooks as a prospective gagman, but Liebman, notoriously thrifty, did not want more writers on the payroll. Apart from himself (he’d started as a writer) and Caesar (who always contributed), he had the gifted duo of Tolkin and Kallen. Brooks had to wait outside in the corridor and then race to catch up with Caesar as the star left meetings, fuming and in long stride. Brooks would throw out jokes and ideas—which from the get-go usually came in the form of icing on the cake—his verbal spin on other people’s lame finishes, “topping” the comedy to Caesar’s satisfaction. Inside the room, the proven scribes—the older, taller Tolkin, always billed first, and Kallen—paid little heed to
Brooks, at least initially. But Tolkin’s family had fled Russia and anti-Semitic pogroms; he was a sensitive man who was always in dialogue with his own conscience, and gradually he and then Kallen took sympathetic note of Brooks. Caesar decided to pay Brooks a little money out of his own pocket, thereby making him his personal gagman. The scowling Liebman looked the other way. Brooks remained persona non grata and had trouble talking his way into the rehearsals and live broadcasts at the International Theatre on Columbus Circle, which served as the NBC broadcasting studio. “He would make catlike noises and scratch at the door in order to be let in,” Caesar recalled. “My manager, Leo Pillot, refused to believe that Mel knew me, and had two ushers grab him and literally toss him into the alley. When I found out about it, I told them that we were friends and it was okay to let him in.”

When Admiral Broadway Revue premiered on Friday, January 28, 1949, it made an instant impression. Caesar was “[as] great on TV as he’s been in other branches of showbiz,” Billboard enthused, and the star was sublimely matched with Coca in the sketches. (Coca, a deft light comedienne, singer, and pantomimist, quickly outshone Mary McCarty, who would not last into the next year’s Your Show of Shows.) The versatile singers and dancers behind the stars included the young Bob Fosse and the married smoothies Marge and Gower Champion, who were catapulted onto the cover of Life. Much of the Revue was borrowed from Tamiment, Caesar’s nightclub act, and his previous stage shows, but for the first time a national television audience was exposed to his specialties: the foreign-language gibberish and bits such as “Nonentities in the News,” where he played a know-it-all ignoramus professor. Ratings soared, and sales of Admiral TV sets emptied out the warehouses. Liebman was hailed as “the new Ziegfeld of TV.”

Brooks made small, targeted contributions, including to a skit for Caesar called “Bomba, the Jungle Boy.” Caesar was “a boy from the African jungles, who had been discovered wearing a lion skin roaming the streets of midtown Manhattan,” in the words of comedian Steve Allen, who published this excerpt from the skit in his book Funny People:

**Interviewer:** Sir, how do you survive in New York City? What do you eat?

**Caesar:** Pigeon.

**Interviewer:** Don’t the pigeons object?

**Caesar:** Only for a minute.

**Interviewer:** What are you afraid of more than anything?

**Caesar:** Buick.

**Interviewer:** You’re afraid of a Buick?

**Caesar:** Yes. Buick can win in a death struggle. Must sneak up on parked Buick, punch grill hard. Buick die. A proper ending to that exchange stumped the salaried writers: Tolkin and Kallen—Caesar and Liebman, too—were all credited as writers in the early days. “Something was missing from the piece,” James Robert Parish wrote in It’s Good to Be the King. “No one could quite put his or her finger on what new funny ingredient needed to be introduced.” Caesar summoned Brooks, commanding him, “Do something. Write!” Brooks improvised “a few off-the-wall ideas,” according to Parish, which went nowhere, until he suggested “a bizarre noise,” which the gagman dubbed “The Cry of the Crazy Cow,” a “strange, harsh cawing sound” that indicated how Bomba, the Jungle Boy, ordered breakfast in the jungle. That was something Caesar had in common with Brooks: both loved weird noises. The star guffawed. “It worked,” Parish wrote. The crazy cawing went into the sketch. To most people he was the Kid, the schlepper, Caesar’s jester. “I belonged to Sid,” Brooks recalled. “Sid called me night or day, sometimes three in the morning. ‘I need a joke.’” But Brooks began to think of himself as a gagman—a bona fide species in show business. Not once, however, was he screen-credited for Admiral Broadway Revue. And the twenty-two-year-old wannabe was still shut out of all the important meetings.

When, surprisingly, Admiral Broadway Revue was canceled in June 1949—for the remarkable reason that Admiral executives had decided to channel their allocation for the series into stepped-up factory production to meet the surge in demand for new TV sets—the hurt was only temporary. NBC quickly authorized a new series starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, produced by Max Liebman, to be introduced in the
midseason of 1950. The new series raised the production budget and everyone’s salaries, and Caesar was allowed to take over several floors of office and rehearsal space at NBC’s City Center facility on West 55th Street. Over the summer, Brooks continued to juggle day jobs and moonlight in the Catskills while never, not for the next ten years, straying far from Caesar’s side. Brooks recognized that “his relationship with Sid Caesar was that of a child clamoring for the attention and approval of a father,” as Kenneth Tynan wrote, although the new television star was only four years older than he. (Brooks was hardly alone; other writers for Caesar, even those who were older such as Mel Tolkin, loved and admired Caesar. Several were wont to refer to him, only half jokingly, as “Papa” or “Daddy.”) “I lost my father when I was only two,” Brooks explained once in an interview. “I can’t even remember him. There’s something big, you know, emotionally missing in my life. [Making] alliances with father figures was always very important to me. Like Sid Caesar—he was very important to me, emotionally as well as professionally.” Caesar treated Brooks in fatherly fashion sometimes, taking Brooks along with him on the road to Chicago, for example, in late June after Admiral Broadway Revue went off the air. Caesar was booked into the Empire Room of the Palmer House, and he wanted refinements in his nightclub act, in which Caesar convulsed audiences with what were already evergreens from his repertoire, giving impersonations, according to a Chicago Tribune columnist, of “slot machines, aerial dogfights, condensed movie plots, a callow youth at his first prom, and French and British casts enacting the same playlet.” Caesar’s two-week engagement at the Empire Room stretched into a triumphant eight-week stand. Brooks was there for much of that time, getting to know and love Chicago, as was another one of Caesar’s close companions—his older brother and chief lieutenant, Dave—“the funniest, the most good-hearted and finest man I ever knew,” in Caesar’s words. Savvy about show business, Dave was the one who coined the phrase “Funny is money.” (“Exec is dreck,” Dave would add, especially in later years after Caesar became his own producer.) Brooks had long since begun to collect such little sayings, adopting them as his own, popularizing them for his own purposes. Another was something Adolphe Menjou said to Eleanor Powell in some forgotten movie: “Tops in taps!” Dave sided with his brother on the subject of Brooks; both liked the younger man. At night after performances the Caesar brothers and Brooks all hung out with lead dancer Bob Fosse, who’d been on Admiral Broadway Revue and now was part of the stage act. The William Morris Agency was helping to package the new NBC series for Caesar. The popular dance bands of the 1930s and ’40s had begun to lose their luster. The agency had begun to gravitate toward nightclub and hotel bookings with comedians, more and more, as the top attractions of the future. Through Liebman, Caesar had the benefit of agency resources, and at his Chicago opening, Brooks sat at a front table with Lou Weiss from the William Morris Agency, who’d come from New York to stroke the ego of the agency’s hottest new star. Brooks did not have an agent yet; he lusted after such powerful representation and did his best to ingratiate himself with the William Morris man. Chapter 31949

Funny Is Money

Your Show of Shows would never have come to pass without Max Liebman, although it was Sid Caesar who stood center stage, with everything depending on him and his exploding talent. If Liebman rejected a joke or an idea, there might be wiggle room; if Caesar rejected a joke or an idea, it was dead. But Caesar had huge mood swings; he could be very calm and businesslike at one moment and other times extremely volatile or tricky to read. Among Liebman’s many gifts was his ability to handle Caesar. At the outset of Your Show of Shows, Liebman was essential as its producer, Caesar was indebted to him, and they had a close partnership. Drawing on lessons from Tamiment and previous shows they had done, Liebman took the lead in organizing the new series around the brilliance of Caesar and Imogene Coca; the skits, mime, comedy, and songs—Caesar and
Coca together, alone, and with guest stars—would be interspersed with jazz, opera, and a corps de ballet capable of any style of dance. “What we did, every night, in Max’s mind,” Brooks said later, “was a Broadway revue.” Liebman signed backstage personnel for the series that would guarantee not only a high production gloss but also continuity with his and Caesar’s mutual past. There were key holdovers from Admiral Broadway Revue, many dating back to Make Mine Manhattan or Tamiment, including set designer Frederick Fox, costumer Paul duPont, choreographer James Starbuck, musical supervisor Charles Sanford, and director Hal Keith. Liebman also brought back the nonpareil writing twosome of Mel Tolkin and Lucille Kallen. They’d pen every script for the first half season of Your Show of Shows, although Liebman and Caesar were also often credited on the screen. And many specialty writers passed through the revolving door to help out with spot material. A nonentity from Liebman’s point of view, at the start of the first half season of Your Show of Shows, Brooks was still shut out of the meetings that mattered. A composer waiting outside Liebman’s office at NBC, hoping for a job writing song and dance numbers, recalled his first sight of Brooks racing up the stairs one day, yanking open Liebman’s door, shouting “Fuck!,” slamming it, then running back down the stairs. “Fuck!” meant it was an important meeting and Liebman had waved at the gagman to go away. Enemies caffeinated Brooks, and he took relish in irritating the boss with his cockiness, his arrogance, his bursting into rooms and rehearsals where he wasn’t welcome. Caesar was usually his best audience, laughing at such shenanigans, but “I was not entertained,” Liebman recalled, “when, on several occasions, I came upon [Brooks] in my chair, smoking my cigar, with his feet on my desk wearing my shoes.” However, for Your Show of Shows Brooks was admitted to the interim writers’ room, which was rented space at the Malin Studios on West 46th Street. The “closet sized cubbyhole,” in Tolkin’s words, had previously been used as the male dancers’ changing room; hence its nickname, the Jockstrap Room. Over time Tolkin and Kallen had surrendered to Brooks, recognizing his occasional valuable contributions, even if Little Mel—as he was dubbed to distinguish him from the older, taller Big Mel—often irritated them, too. When there were story conferences, Caesar and Liebman also congregated in the Jockstrap Room with Tolkin, Kallen, and Brooks, and Liebman’s cigar figured in the arguments that could turn fierce. The producer liked to quote a supposed Goldwynism to explain his theory about script conferences (“From a polite conference comes a polite script”), but Brooks made an art of impoliteness; irrepressibly rude and crude, he’d pop off with jokes so out of context that Liebman would whip his burning stogie out of his mouth and hurl it at him. “That to me was more than the playful rejection of an idea,” Tolkin recalled. “It was the rejection of Mel as a person, someone to be taken seriously.” Tolkin and Kallen were the stable personalities. They were not spontaneous, or shouters. Shouting made them uncomfortable. Tolkin was inarguably the lead writer, and Kallen was generally the only woman in the room, the only sitter, the person taking notes, capturing lines as the sketches evolved. Most of the time the stable writers had come in before the conferences with drafts of the sketches. Then the shouting started. People knew (he compulsively confessed it) that Brooks suffered from insomnia and roamed shows, cafés, bars, and the streets until late at night. He usually fell asleep while watching TV; that was one reason why he often burst into the middle of meetings and story conferences and was especially cantankerous and discommodulated in the morning. His expected job—his role as gagman—was to top off what someone else had already written with a better joke or stronger finish. Everyone else in the room might be trying hard to solve the same problem. Brooks would do anything to grab attention; he’d shout insults or jump onto a desk, waving his arms. His proffered toppers were often flabbergasting non sequiturs, but other times he really hit the bull’s-eye. “He always had a joke,” Kallen recalled.
“Nine out of ten were ‘forget it,’ and the tenth was brilliant.” (Later, Carl Reiner was fond of saying “To get one good idea you have to have ten lousy ones.”) His lateness, his rudeness and crudeness, his screaming fits worried Tolkin, who took him aside and related an incident from his youth that had made an impression on him. As a boy Tolkin had been practicing the piano one day, diligently working on his scales, attempting to apply equal graceful pressure to each note in spite of a sluggish thumb. A younger kid from his neighborhood had appeared, slid next to him at the piano, and started banging away with his fist, shouting rapturously “Look, I can play! I can play!” Brooks nodded as he listened to Tolkin’s anecdote. He understood that the story underlined the differences between the two Mels. Big Mel lived a structured existence, agonizing over his ability to do anything serious or artistic with his talent. “The one enjoying the sounds he makes at the piano,” in Tolkin’s words, that was Little Mel. Tolkin perceived the hidden depths of anger and angst in Brooks, and he empathized with anger and angst. He took Brooks under his wing, urging him to read Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky and to exhibit more patience and decorum if he wanted to be a writer. “The Russian novelists made me realize it’s a bigger ballpark than the Bilko show,” Brooks said later. “Right from the moment I read them, I knew I wanted to achieve more than Doc [Neil] Simon and Abe Burrows did. I wanted to be the American Molière, the new Aristophanes.” Everyone noticed how “an ancient Jewish respect for literature,” in Kallen’s words, began to improve Brooks’s behavior—if only a tad. In numerous interviews Brooks said Tolkin was not just an early paragon of the profession for him; he was the Caesar writer who more than any other took the show into the realm of “the human condition.” “He was never Bob Hope contemporary,” Brooks said; Tolkin wrote about “what happened in the human heart, and he taught me that.” More crucially, Tolkin was another father figure, an older man who treated him sympathetically at a time in his life and career when Brooks needed the touch of love. Tolkin and Kallen worked like Trojans. Liebman gradually yielded to other responsibilities. Caesar increasingly reigned, making emendations to scripts as they evolved, as well as in performance. Often enough, Brooks slid in with his brilliance. Although the talent, power, and maturity were not equally dispersed in the Jockstrap Room, a rhythm and teamwork soon emerged that would produce fabled scripts. The machinery of the team needed constant oil and grease, there were continual crises, eruptions, and breakdowns, but for as long as it lasted it was a beautiful machine. Your Show of Shows premiered on February 25, 1950, shooting fireworks into the sky for thirteen weeks. The one-and-a-half-hour-long program was presented as part of a two-and-a-half-hour-long live block of time called The NBC Saturday Night Revue. As was true of Admiral Broadway Revue, the new Sid Caesar series was performed and broadcast live before a studio audience without taped applause, cue cards, or teleprompters. Caesar’s share of the time block was preceded by one hour of The Jack Carter Hour, also transmitted live from Chicago from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time; that led into the hour-and-a-half-long Your Show of Shows from 9:00 to 10:30 p.m., beamed from Rockefeller Center. The rapid-fire Carter was more of a traditional stand-up comedian, but the two variety programs overlapped with peculiarly similar formats (Carter’s also featured a recurring German professor, for example). The great difference really was Caesar. Actor Burgess Meredith emceed the Your Show of Shows premiere and joined in the sketches with Caesar and another guest star, the stage doyenne Gertrude Lawrence. Caesar and Imogene Coca teamed up to parody silent pictures; Caesar played Columbus quelling a mutiny while en route to America; and Coca warbled a beguiling “Smorgasbord Song.” The Metropolitan Opera baritone Robert Merrill performed a duet with the soprano Marguerite Piazza, and Nelle Fisher and Jerry Ross demonstrated ballet and folk dances. Though critical reaction to The Jack Carter Show was mixed (“not good,” the New York
Times declared), reviewers rhapsodized over Your Show of Shows. Variety, the show business bible, said Caesar’s new showcase was adult and imaginative, magnificently produced—“big time entertainment and sales potential.” Caesar was the “standout,” but Coca, long “a comedienne of much promise,” had found her natural groove as his female counterpart and foil. The influential television critic Jack Gould of the Times said Caesar’s maturing artistry now ranked him “with the genuine clowns of the day.” Again Brooks’s name never once appeared on the screen during the debut half season of Your Show of Shows. Max Liebman’s resistance to Brooks was linked to his faith in the Tolkin-Kallen combo and to his reluctance to pay for a third writer. Moreover, Liebman viewed Brooks as a “talking writer,” not a “writing writer.” His spin and toppers were great, but Tolkin and Kallen—and he and Caesar—were writing writers. With Liebman still refusing to hire him, Caesar continued to dole out $40 weekly to Brooks, which got pushed up to $45 or $50 when Brooks dragged the star down to Horatio Street, showing him his humble digs and impressing Caesar with his poverty. NBC was overjoyed at the show’s success and ordered up a full season for 1950–1951: thirty-nine hour-and-a-half-long episodes. (“We were too stupid to know it was impossible,” Tolkin said later.) Liebman and Caesar immediately began looking to augment the ensemble and take pressure off the stars—Caesar and Imogene Coca—meeting with Carl Reiner, an “all around utility man,” in Variety’s words, who had appeared in other Max Liebman ventures, and the high-strung, priggish Howard Morris, whose short height made him the natural butt of physical humor. Reiner and Morris were compatible with the show and each other; they had crossed paths in radio and army shows. Classically trained, Morris had played Rosencrantz in Maurice Evans’s most recent Hamlet and made his comedy debut on television the previous spring, doing small parts on Admiral Broadway Revue. Currently he had a billed role on Broadway in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Anita Loos’s 1926 comedy revamped as a musical for Carol Channing. Caesar took one look at Morris and lifted the short actor up by the lapels until their eyes locked; Caesar’s head swiveled to Liebman: Him. Get! Brooks, who was also in the room, proceeded to pose as a visiting Parisian scholar, speaking mangled French to Morris for ensuing hours, days, or weeks—depending on versions of the anecdote. While the TV world was fixated on Your Show of Shows in early 1950, New York theater mavens were more focused on Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, which had become a sensation after its celebrity-studded December 8, 1949, opening at the newly renovated Ziegfeld Theatre. Gentlemen Prefer Blondes boasted the prettiest chorus of singers and dancers in memory, and an army of stage door Johnnys pursued them. Brooks began to turn up, ostensibly visiting Morris. Not all the chorus girls were blondes; many were dark beauties of the type Brooks confessed to preferring. This group included Polly Ward, one of triplet sisters, a short, cute midwesterner, and Mary Katherine Martinet, whom everyone called “M.K.”—she hailed from Baltimore and had short brown hair and a gorgeous body. Ward and Martinet were strong, athletic types, while another chorine, their friend Florence Baum, a nineteen-year-old from Brooklyn, was more elegant and graceful and was ballet trained. A number of the nonstars often went out on the town after the final curtain, and Brooks, looking almost as dapper as Howard Morris, palled along. He put a successful full-court press first on Polly Ward, then on M.K. M.K. hypnotized men: her personality was electric, her body sinuous. Brooks thought he might be in love with the dancer, eight years older than he, and M.K. made no secret of their intense sexual chemistry. The third dancer in the trio of friends had just sat down to a scrambled eggs supper with Morris in his Greenwich Village apartment one Sunday night when the doorbell rang. Morris nursed a crush on Florence Baum, although they would only ever be platonic friends. Morris had just separated from his first wife, and Baum was playing hard to get with Herman Levin, the roly-poly producer of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,
while trying to decide what to do about the heavy come-hither signals she was getting from the much handsomer Dean Martin. On Sundays, her Blondes night off, Baum often danced on NBC’s The Colgate Comedy Hour, where Martin did his act with Jerry Lewis. Two men strolled in the door when Morris opened it. One, Brooks’s Horatio Street roommate, was pleasant looking; the other, bristling like a porcupine, not so much, Baum thought. That was her first close-up of Mel Brooks, who frowned when Morris introduced everyone, mentioning that Baum and Dean Martin were a romantic item. Brooks seemed to radiate hostility. Making a rude comment about her bright red lipstick, the visitor reached over with one finger, traced it across her lower lip, and smeared the lipstick across Baum’s face. Outraged, Morris threw Brooks and his roommate out. Brooks never intimidated the scrappy Morris, then or later. Partly for that reason—in addition to his classical training and their age difference (Morris was almost seven years older than Brooks)—Morris held a peculiar edge in their lifelong friendship. Brooks put a different full-court press on Max Liebman. Mel Tolkin and Lucille Kallen needed help for a full season of Your Show of Shows, and Liebman finally consented to a work-for-hire salary in the fall and a screen credit for Brooks if the show used any of his ideas. If you didn’t have a powerful agent, you were doubly powerless in negotiations with Liebman. By early 1950, Brooks had finally wangled his first representation: a small-timer working out of his own theater district office named Fred Wolfe. Wolfe advertised Brooks as a “special material writer for Sid Caesar.” But the small-timer had little clout, and the only job he could finagle for Brooks was Brooks’s first stab at acting on television: a part as a brash window washer in pitchman Sid Stone’s regular segment on Milton Berle’s Texaco Star Theater. That Star Theater was packaged by the William Morris Agency, where Brooks boasted contacts via Caesar, didn’t hurt. Stone: So, you’re a window washer, and you’re working on the Empire State Building. What’s your biggest fear? Brooks (foreshadowing High Anxiety): Pigeons! This early proof of Brooks’s willingness to try anything aired in 1950. He performed dynamically in his fleeting turn at a point in time when the Milton Berle show was top rated (“I was the king of Williamsburg,” Brooks recalled). But it was a one-off, no miracle followed, and a decade would pass before his face was again glimpsed on national TV. In June, meanwhile, Caesar opened a new stage show at the Roxy Theatre, featuring Imogene Coca along with Faye Emerson. Brooks was ubiquitous in the greenroom. But after that he had to spend the rest of the summer scrounging for work: more drumming, a few Catskills dates as a comic. The summer of 1950 is probably when he traded on his Caesar connections for a few weeks as social director at Grossinger’s, producing the midweek entertainment. “Brooks was on the staff to write a show—the staff show,” recalled Bill Persky, then serving in a lowly capacity at Grossinger’s. (Persky and collaborator Sam Denoff would go on to write several hit TV comedies and create That Girl starring Marlo Thomas.) “He entertained at the midweek variety show. On the weekends, they’d have big stars, but during the week they’d have lesser people. And Mel got to do stand-up and insulted everyone to the point that they ran him off the grounds the next day.” Much of the summer, however, Brooks spent traipsing after Caesar and M. K. Martinet. By September, he was firmly ensconced in better, jockstrap-less writers’ offices at NBC, however, working on a daily basis with Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen, and Caesar, with Max Liebman increasingly preoccupied with demanding production chores. When The NBC Saturday Night Revue premiered in the fall of 1950, again the allotted time was divided between the one-hour Jack Carter Show, which had been moved from Chicago to NBC headquarters in New York, and the one-and-a-half-hour Your Show of Shows, with its broadcast following Carter’s in the same studio. Carter continued to lose ground—his series was canceled after that second season—while the first thirty-nine-week season of Your Show of Shows was lionized as the best and most sophisticated on
television, thanks to the “remarkably gifted” Caesar, as Jack Gould wrote in the New York Times. “There can no longer be any doubt that Sid,” he proclaimed, “is now a star.” The “sock mature” entertainment, in Variety’s words, continued to revolve around Caesar and his genius: his engaging pantomimes, dialect takeoffs and double-talk, his recurring characters. But Coca was a vital adjunct as his pixyish leading lady; she had solo flights that were just as mesmerizing, and together they hit “expert comedic stride,” said Variety. Their regular sketches together as the squabbling Hickenloopers would fast become a beloved fixture of the show; they were a strong suit of Tolkin and Kallen’s, who drew on vignettes from their own (separate) marriages. The variegated format of the show stayed basically the same, although Caesar and Liebman persistently tinkered with the mix and the regular performers, partly because of incessant budget issues. The longhair singers Robert Merrill and Marguerite Piazza were among the people in the original ensemble who returned for the first full season; so did Bill Hayes, a popular vocalist (it would not be long before he reached number one on the charts with “The Ballad of Davy Crockett”), who could also be counted on to act in sketches. The Billy Williams Quartet supplied rhythm and blues and jazz. The Hamilton Trio of Bob Hamilton, Gloria Stevens (Mrs. Hamilton), and Patricia “Pat” Horn performed novelty dance numbers. Your Show of Shows still opened with a celebrity guest who joined the sketches, but the extra celebrity or two from the opening half season was dropped because of budget concerns and a growing belief that Caesar himself could carry the program on his lifeguard-broad shoulders. Behind the scenes, the $40,000 weekly costs were the highest in prime time, along with Milton Berle’s number one–rated Texaco Star Theater. (By comparison, Arthur Godfrey’s series, also in the top ten, cost about half as much.) The top dollar paid to guest stars on Your Show of Shows—as much as $5,000 per episode—didn’t help. The talent portion of the weekly nut, which included the guest stars along with the salaries of Caesar and Coca—both now under exclusive contract to Liebman—also ranked among TV’s highest: $32,000. Caesar had built-in hikes to boost his weekly paycheck from $7,500 to $10,000 over 1950–1951, while Coca was already demanding similar escalation clauses. Liebman added similar incentives to his producer’s salary with raises he paid to himself out of the overall budget furnished by the network. Those economic imperatives impelled Liebman to eliminate celebrity frills and solidify the stock company. Partly to stabilize the rising talent costs, Carl Reiner joined Your Show of Shows midway through the 1950–51 season, soon followed by Howard Morris. Serendipitously, the budget issues also helped to solidify Brooks’s position as third man on the totem pole. The pace of production was punishing for the writers; a new script had to be served up every week for thirty-nine weeks, translating into a six-day workweek of furious writing and rewriting, extending through the rehearsals leading up to Saturday night’s live broadcast. Sunday was the only day off, and then Monday started the pressure cooker all over again. Even Sunday was only a half day for Tolkin and Kallen, who always arrived on Monday morning having roughed out the next Hickenloopers vignette. (By midseason, the exhausted Caesar and Coca had begun to take episodes off, a pattern that would grow.) Numerous spot writers cycled in and out, helping to ease the burden on Tolkin and Kallen. But Brooks was always around, pitching jokes and ideas. At last Liebman surrendered, awarding Brooks his first credit on the screen early in the 1950–51 season. Brooks proposed a setup for “Nonentities in the News,” with Caesar as a “Stanislavski disciple, Ivano Ivanovich, who expounds upon Method acting,” as William Holtzman wrote, “and, by way of illustration, does an impression of a pinball caroming its way around a pinball machine (with bounds, clangs, and choreography) as well as his rendition of Romeo and Juliet (both parts, in alternately basso and falsetto Russian gibberish).” For the Stanislavski skit and other contributions in 1950–1951, Brooks was listed under
“Additional Material,” sharing that peripheral credit with other writers. Even so, Brooks finally managed to attract the attention of the William Morris Agency. Harry Kalcheim, a wheeler-dealer of the all-powerful talent agency, had been Liebman’s agent since Tamiment days, and he also represented many of the other Your Show of Shows performers, including Carl Reiner. Kalcheim took Brooks on as a client. With Brooks looking over his shoulder attentively, Kalcheim ironed out the details of his contract when Liebman—like all the principals, exhausted by the rigors of thirty-nine weekly shows—finally agreed to add Brooks to the official staff for the upcoming 1951–52 season. Once again, after the last broadcast in June 1951, Caesar and his brother Dave and Brooks headed to Chicago for another two-week stand. Though they bunked at the Palmer House, this time their booking was at the bigger Chicago Theatre in the Loop. Caesar’s revue accommodated many from the cast of Your Show of Shows with most of the comedy and music also recycled from the TV series, the whole extravaganza produced by Liebman. Heartland viewers of the TV series were important to NBC, and Caesar had played Chicago regularly since 1946. That was where the idea of a success beyond New York—success in “John Wayne country”—became rooted in Brooks’s professional psychology. The visiting troupe from New York included Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner, Bill Hayes, and the Billy Williams Quartet, but oftentimes in the wee hours the socializing came down to just the Caesar brothers and Brooks. Sid was always wired after delivering an adrenaline-charged performance, and after a show he liked to retreat to his hotel room, where he customarily downed several whiskeys. Offstage, the dynamic Caesar ceased to exist. (“Without a character to hide behind,” Larry Gelbart said later, “Sid was lost.”) One night, they relaxed after the show in Caesar’s suite on the twelfth or eighteenth floor (“as retold by many persons over the years,” James Robert Parish wrote in his biography, “the setting of the incident kept moving up to higher floors”). Caesar drank steadily, saying little, as was his custom. Brother Dave watched warily. Brooks was not a heavy drinker, but wired was also his natural state after dark, and as always he was restless; he yearned to go outside and do something—anything! Brooks paced the room, repeatedly mentioning favorite nightspots. Caesar didn’t have the same roaming instincts. “Let’s go somewhere and do something!” Brooks kept insisting. “Let’s see the nightlife!” Finally tired of his jabber, Caesar shoved open a window, grabbed the smaller man, lifted Brooks up by the seat of his pants, and thrust him out into the cool night air, holding him by his feet upside down, dangling from some manner of height. “How far do you want to go? Is that far enough?” he shouted. Dave was on his feet in a flash, pulling at his brother. “In would be nice,” Brooks is said to have quipped. “In is good.” That might be the enduring image of their friendship in the early years, symbolic of the disparity in their relationship: Caesar dangling his personal jester out of a hotel window. Mel Tolkin, reflecting on Brooks’s career in later years, thought the jester’s voluntary clowning in the early 1950s had enabled Caesar’s alcoholism, his womanizing, and other self-destructive habits that worsened over time. Tolkin couldn’t understand why Brooks permitted the “humiliation of being held by his feet out of the eighteenth floor of a hotel, by Sid,” in Tolkin’s words, in order to score brownie points with the star. After the dangling incident, Brooks followed Caesar and his wife, Florence, to Grossinger’s for a visit in early July. One of the advantages of traveling with Caesar was that doors opened up to people of importance. At Grossinger’s they mingled with other visiting celebrities, including Jerry Lewis, whom Brooks met for the first time. Brooks worshipped Lewis, who was already a major star on television and in motion pictures with his partner, Dean Martin, and envied his success. A demented comedian with a naive, bratty persona and a stock in trade heavy on rubber faces and weird noises, Lewis was also a surprisingly endearing singer and dancer. Though evoking Harry Ritz, another comedian
Brooks loved, it was clear that Lewis had it all over Ritz and would go further. While in Chicago, Carl Reiner had invited Brooks to come to Fire Island in August. Reiner and his wife, Estelle, had leased a small cottage in Ocean Beach, Fire Island's de facto capital. New York artists and entertainers flocked to Ocean Beach in the summer. Besides the Reiners, the Your Show of Shows contingent included Sid Caesar and Florence, who was pregnant, and Mel Tolkin, his wife, Edith, and her parents. The Reiners would be vacating their place before Labor Day weekend. Brooks could move in. In the middle of the night Brooks woke up Tolkin and everyone else, pounding on the Tolkin front door in a panic, clutching, to defend himself, a kitchen utensil. He was "incoherent with fear," Tolkin recalled, and refused to spend the night alone in the Reiners' vacation cottage. He insisted that only Caesar could protect him and pleaded for Florence to sleep out on the enclosed porch while he took over the couple's bedroom with Caesar. It took some time to calm him down. Displacing Florence was out of the question, Big Mel told Little Mel, finally convincing him to take the couch on the Tolkin porch, where Brooks fell asleep clutching his culinary weapon. "I've always thought of Mel's visit as a search for security, for a safe haven," Tolkin recalled, "a fear of abandonment."

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Funny Man cod mw2


What people say about this book

Alan Weiss, "Not So Funny Man. This is a highly uncharitable view of Mel Brooks's life and works. It's far too long because the author doesn't choose to tell us what we need to know, but rather everything that he knows. I got the feeling that every electronic file and index card that was created made its way into the book. Do we really need to know that an assistant cameraman on a film became the sound guy five years later on another one? It's almost that tedious. The eye-opener for me was the ongoing depiction of Brooks as selfish, abrupt, parsimonious, and egocentric to an extreme. For his entire career as a writer he never wrote—he was called a "talking writer" and someone else had to write down the outpourings. According to the author's research, Brooks is also highly litigious. The author mentions several times that, of all his books, more people refused to be interviewed for this one, citing Brooks's massive temper and readiness to sue. And Brooks is well into his 90s! The background of the various movies and plays is interesting, especially the casting and fights over various credits, as well as Brooks's cleverness in building his own fortune through overseas rights. His treatment of his first wife is nothing less than detestable. His love affair with and marriage to
Anne Bancroft is delightful. I've always considered Brooks funny and no less now. But I've also believed that all comedy, especially Jewish comedy, is rooted in pain, and this book demonstrates not only the truth in that belief but also the pain it can cause for innocent bystanders. The book would be far better at two-thirds the length, and Brooks, apparently, would have been far better with two-thirds more charity and generosity.

D. K. Daniel, “‘IT’S TWUE, IT’S TWUE!’ LOVABLE MEL BROOKS A FUNNY MAN, NOT ALWAYS SO LOVABLE. My high school pal and I sneaked off one Friday night to see “Blazing Saddles.” We were 17, which made us ‘legal’ to get into an R-rated film. It still felt like an act of rebellion. Our parents wouldn’t have approved. The campfire scene alone was worth the ticket, but there was so much more. There’s so much more to Mel Brooks, too, and “Funny Man” is a serious biography about a seriously funny man. Behind the talk-show antics and the big-screen parodies is a self-made entertainer who worked hard to achieve and maintain his standing as one of the most reliable laugh-makers around. If dying is hard and comedy is harder — well, the business of comedy is harder still, if Mel’s career is any example. Fueling Mel’s rise from teenage Brooklyn wiseacre to national clown is an out-size ego. The talent hasn’t always been strong enough to support the ego. His career has had plenty of failures amid the enormous hits. But those hits — “Get Smart” in TV, “The 2,000-Year-Old Man” in recordings, “The Producers” on Broadway and a string of movies are pretty darn solid. Comedy isn’t all fun and games, and neither is Mel. He covets credit and at times seems to want more than his fair share. He covets the money that laughter generates and at times seems to want more than his fair share. His first shot at being a husband was a misfire and he wasn’t the best ex-husband either. Tread carefully: Mel is as well-armed with lawyers as he is with humor. (Mel does have an eye for and an appreciation of talent. For example, when no one else would take a chance on young David Lynch, Mel did. Lynch had the freedom to make “The Elephant Man” his way because Mel backed him up.) All this and more make Mel Brooks a real person, not just the character he’s created for our amusement. And author Patrick McGilligan makes “Funny Man” a fascinating read — a well-sourced, painstakingly researched tale of a success that has had plenty of high notes and more than a few sour ones. But I’ll take those laughs any day.”

Crazy Feline, “Meticulously Researched. The author has written the gold standard of Mel Brooks biographies. No stone unturned. I only bought this tome to read what a cheapskate and credit stealer this guy was and I wasn’t disappointed. Brooks claims to have written everything he’s ever been involved in and doesn’t give credit to the people who did. He’s a deplorable man. Here’s a guy who only made two mildly amusing films in his life and claims to be the funniest man in America. Brooks has got to be the most overrated comedian in history. Whatever.”

jo, “very funny man and great book. wonderful biography of this great comedian and writer=”

David Perlmutter, “Worth it. A fully detailed and completely informative study of a fascinating man.”

The book by Patrick McGilligan has a rating of 5 out of 4.4. 116 people have provided feedback.
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