



PHOTOS BY WILLIAM VASTA

Another America: The World According to Mort Sahl

BY NICHOLAS OWCHAR '90



Mort Sahl is wearing a new title: “Professor.” Twice weekly the legendary comedian and actor can be found meeting with students on campus to discuss a broad range of timely issues—everything from war to gender to political assassination.

And what does he hope to teach? That public service doesn’t require holding public office; it starts by opening your eyes, he says—by asking questions.

“I want to show these young students some real heroes, not the ones they see on cable,” says Sahl, who will next semester instruct a course on screenwriting at CMC. “I want to teach them about their country’s hidden history.”



In 1960, the same year that Peanuts creator Charles Schulz pencils fellow humorist Mort Sahl into his increasingly popular strip, Sahl landed the cover of *TIME*.

Although the course title—*The Revolutionary’s Handbook*—may sound conspicuous alongside standard economics or political science offerings, it is hardly an exaggeration. For his entire career, Sahl has worked at the crucial crossroads where politics and satire meet. And it is because of his unique perspective that he was invited by The Family of Benjamin Z. Gould Center for Humanistic Studies to join CMC this fall as a visiting lecturer.

“Mort’s career has been spent pushing people to rethink their most cherished beliefs,” says Gould Center director Robert Faggen, the Barton Evans and H. Andrea Neves Professor of Literature. “To have an inventor of modern American

Included, for example, along with classic texts by Aristophanes and Shakespeare, are Stephen Kinzer’s *Overtbrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* and Jon Lee Anderson’s *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*.

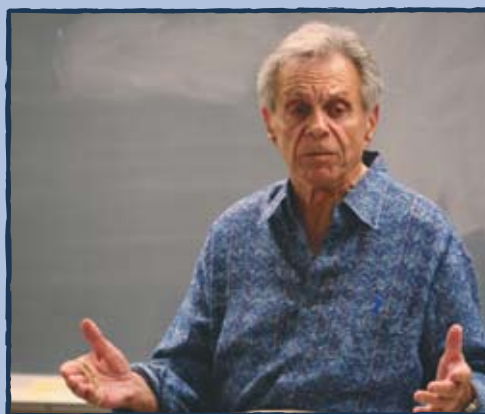
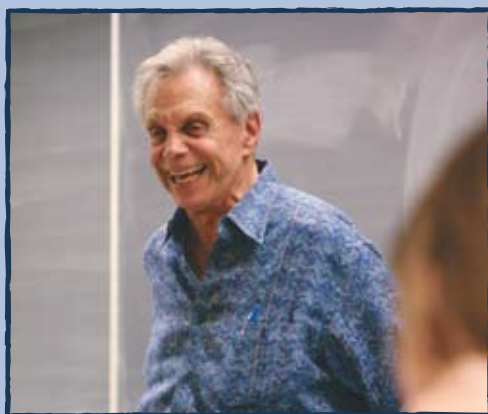
Sahl is also screening movies that, he says, present a vision of justice and America that is romantic. He makes no apologies for his romantic vision: That, he says, is the way our country could be.

Among the films is Frank Capra’s 1938 *You Can’t Take It with You*, as well as *The Great Escape*, a 1963 John Sturges film based on the true story of an Allied escape attempt from a German POW camp during World War II.

Sahl talked about everything. He changed the conversation. You know, it makes sense to find him in a classroom. He’s been a teacher all his life.”

Known as the “rebel without a pause,” Sahl had a quick, uptempo style of delivery. He rose to prominence during a time of tumult and mounting crisis: the advent of the nuclear age, the beginnings of the Cold War, the McCarthy hearings, and the emergence of a rebellious youth culture.

The public needed some relief and Sahl gave it, but never by avoiding the day’s issues. During the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings, for instance, he drew a laugh even as he



political satire in the classroom is such a rich opportunity for students. We couldn’t pass this up.”

Consider the visit a unique twist on the College’s longstanding mission of developing “leaders in the making.”

While CMC has served as a springboard for captains of industry and elected officials, there are many roads to political and social engagement. Sahl’s entire career is a demonstration of this.

Today, at 80, he’s as restless and as concerned about the state of the world as he was in the 1950s and 1960s.

“There is another America out there that is different from the one the students know,” he says.

To show students what this other America is like, Sahl has created a reading list that is formidable and provocative.

Such movies, he says, show decisive action—people taking a stand—and Sahl expects his students to take their cues: No passivity allowed; he wants them to think about their place—their role—in the world, even if it shakes up their sense of comfort.

Shaking things up is what Sahl has done since first taking the stage in the 1950s. Gerald Nachman, who charted the rise of Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and other modern comedians in his recent book *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, said that when Sahl came along, comedians weren’t supposed to ruffle the audience’s feathers.

“The mantra had been ‘Don’t talk politics, religion or sex.’ Talk about your wife or your mother-in-law, but don’t upset anybody,” Nachman recalls. “Well,

condemned HUAC’s tactics: “Every time the Russians throw an American in jail,” he told audiences, “the Committee throws an American in jail to get even.”

On stage and on various television programs, including *The Steve Allen Show* and *The Tonight Show*, Sahl appeared in his trademark pullover sweater; in place of a comedy prop, he held the day’s newspaper. He made it clear that his act was about having a conversation. Clearly he satisfied a hunger in the public, for Sahl’s popularity grew to such a height that in August 1960, *TIME Magazine* presented him—the first comedian ever to appear on the magazine’s cover—as “the patriarch of a new school of comedians.”

And yet, the word “comedian” somehow isn’t enough.

Sahl showed future comics that comedy

“Mort Sahl demands that students challenge the prevalence of nonsense put before them on a daily basis and discover in its deeper history an America worth loving again,” says Robert Faggen, Gould Center director and Barton Evans and H. Andrea Neves Professor of Literature. “I can’t imagine a course or a teacher taking greater critical risks. But he’s lived those risks.”



and satire could be used to elevate public discussions and challenge authority to be accountable. Although he wrote campaign speeches for John F. Kennedy, he didn’t hesitate to be critical of the president in his act. After President Kennedy’s assassination, Sahl joined the investigation, led by New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison, challenging the “lone gunman” findings of the Warren Commission.

In Sahl’s staking out an unpopular conclusion and holding his ground, and in his career-long effort to stay nonpartisan (he throws barbs at Republicans and Democrats alike), Faggen says students are learning that risk-taking is sometimes required to serve the public good.

“Mort has always taken enormous risks. That is sometimes what is expected of you,” Faggen says. “From the beginning of his performing career, he’s never done the safe thing.”

Sahl’s course poses an interesting challenge. His students have grown up in a time when TV comedians such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are riding enormous waves of popularity for creating shows that skewer politicians. Although it would be easiest to connect with his students by identifying himself as these comedians’ precursor, Sahl won’t have any of it. He says that true political satire isn’t what you see on these shows or, for that matter, anywhere else.

“What they’re doing is trading in old comic currency and dressing it up to look like insight. Old gags in disguise,” he says. “I don’t think many comedians are interested in true political satire today. They’re more interested in making money. There’s a price to pay for satire, and who wants to pay it?”

“These comedians make fun of everyone and everything. That’s not satire,” he says. “I’ve always tried to be honest in my routine. I’ve never assumed I was smarter than the audience. Most of the time they’re smarter than me.”

After attending Belmont High School and the University of Southern California (he holds a degree in urban planning), Sahl moved to the Bay Area, where he had his first great success as a comedian at the club the hungry i. He started writing jokes for others, but there was a problem: The comedians didn’t deliver the jokes the way Sahl intended them. The next step was obvious, inevitable—if others couldn’t deliver them as Sahl intended, he’d do it himself. In June, just prior to his arrival at CMC, Sahl was feted on his 80th birthday by a luminous group of comedians including Jay Leno, Bill Maher, Drew Carey, Richard Lewis, George Carlin, Albert Brooks and many more. Held at the Wadsworth Theater in Los Angeles, the event was an opportunity to honor a man who discarded the vaudevillian shtick in favor of making sharp, pithy jabs at such

icons as Richard Nixon, of whom Sahl has said was “born in Whittier, California, in a log cabin in a blue suit.” Or, about rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, the subject of the film *I Aim for the Stars*. Mamie Eisenhower, the president’s wife, accompanied the NASA rocket engineer, who had once worked for the Nazi regime, to the premiere. Sahl at the time suggested what has become an unforgettable subtitle for the movie: *But Sometimes I Hit London*.

Sahl’s visit is one example of the Gould Center’s effort to bring exciting artists from diverse fields into contact with students. The Center hosted a rare visit on Oct. 18 by Turkish Nobel laureate in literature Orhan Pamuk, and looks forward to *Voices from China*, an opportunity this spring for students to talk with dissident writers and painters about the struggles of being artists under a totalitarian regime.

“What we want is to enable our students to see how art and the vital problems of our time interact,” Faggen says.

As for Sahl, he’s delighted to be a part of the Gould Center’s interdisciplinary reach.

“I hope I can just obfuscate the fact that, in school, I was a lousy student!” he says, with a chuckle.

Turning more serious, he adds, “I want to raise the students’ expectations about their country. And maybe, just maybe, I can even get some of them to enlist in the cause.”