

Jazzletter

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Connecting the Dots: Lenny Bruce

Pataki discomfits me. He has a flattish face whose expressions always seems mechanical, like those of such actors as Charlton Heston who affect emotion without ever feeling it. I suppose it's because they can't. Great acting involves identifying yourself with a character other than you, in other words through an escape from solipsism. Emotion expresses itself through the muscles, primarily the facial muscles, and the voice, by engaging the autonomic nervous system, and the only way you can do that is by the total conception *and imaginative internalization* of the character and the momentary situation. And if you do not feel that empathy to the depth that it will set the autonomic nervous system in motion, you can't do persuasive acting like that of Katy Jurado in *One-Eyed Jacks*. It is no coincidence that Heston is a Republican, for Republicanism is not a philosophy, it is the rationalization of avarice. Pataki, I assume, is, like his friend George W. Bush, a religious primitive. And they were precisely the kind of people who went after Lenny.

meanor for a raunchy act.” He doesn’t even say “an allegedly raunchy act,” and he is, one would presume, too young ever to have seen Lenny in a nightclub. Lenny’s act — at least in his best days, before he got frantic from his persecution by the likes of Governor Pataki — was never raunchy.

“Pataki called the action, almost 40 years after Bruce was charged with the misdemeanor of Giving an Indecent Performance, ‘a declaration of New York’s upholding the First Amendment.’

That borders on surrealism, a piece of double-speak of the kind George Orwell foresaw. This comes, let us remember, from a member of the party of John Ashcroft, who is working assiduously for the elimination of those freedoms.

"Bruce was convicted in 1964 on obscenity charges stemming from a performance at Café Au Go Go in Greenwich Village.

"He used more than 100 'obscene' words during the act, undercover detectives who attended testified before a judicial panel.

"Critics say the three judges overlooked the fact that patrons were at the club of their own free will, in a free America, in any even freer, bohemian, New York.

“Acting as his own attorney, the financially drained and emotionally broken comic failed to file proper papers for an appeal before his death by drug overdose in 1966.

"At the age of 40, Lenny Bruce was found dead at his Hollywood home with a syringe still in his arm."

Pataki's pardon of Lenny is particularly ludicrous coming so close upon the great dust-up after Justin Timberlake played peek-a-boob with Janet Jackson during a football

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intermission on television. And that fuss in itself was pretty funny.

For one thing, Janet's jug is not the most shapely in this world, being a bit underslung. Assuming that the other is a match, her goo-goos seem to be embarked on a stately journey to her midriff, which could leave her looking like MM — Marjorie Main, not Marilyn Monroe. The excitement over her performance gave new meaning to H.L. Mencken's definition of America as a boobocracy.

What everyone in the subsequent screaming, including the high dudgeon from Michael Powell, the son of Colin Powell, head of the FCC (given that job in one of the more unembarrassed acts of nepotism in our time) seems to have overlooked is that the performance glamorized sexual assault by a man on a woman: he ripped off part of her clothes. And this act was committed by a white man on a black woman, which should have caused howls from the civil rights groups, but didn't.

I am certainly no fan of Howard Stern, but when he says that he was dropped from a number of radio stations not for obscenities but because he has been such an ardent opponent of George W. Bush, I'm inclined to take it under serious consideration. Remember: within days of the Supreme Court's rubber-stamp of Bush's "election," California (which had voted solidly against him) was punished by a huge increase in electrical rates from Bush's friends and backers at Enron and the total shut-down of one electrical line, which produced the artificial power shortage from which the state suffered that summer. This in turn undermined Governor Gray Davis, and the Republicans immediately launched a recall campaign to get him out of office. This put a Republican, Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the governor's office in Sacramento in time for the 2004 election. It is obvious to all but those who will not see that this was a set-up for the consolidation of the *coup d'état* of 2000 through the election of 2004.

The Republicans no longer believe in democracy and elections. If they don't like an electoral result, even one they have rigged, as in 2000, they will set out immediately to rescind it. When Bill Clinton was elected president, they found an excuse, the alleged Whitewater "scandal," in which a weird, neurotic, hymn-humming attack dog named Ken Starr tried to prove that Clinton had done something "wrong" to get him impeached. When Starr couldn't attain that, he managed with the connivance of a lot of other Republicans to nail Clinton for Monica Lewinsky's blow job. If Clinton lied about sexual misconduct, he wasn't the first man in history to do so, and it had nothing to do with

his competence in office. Starr spent something like 70 million dollars of the public's money, and succeeded only in putting a Clinton friend, Susan MacDougal, in prison for two years because she refused to lie for him. Starr's punishment for his misdeeds? He is now dean of the law school at Pepperdine University. For those who don't know California, Pepperdine is a notoriously right-wing university in Malibu.

And then there's Dick Cheney, who headed the Halliburton Corporation and soon after he and Bush instituted their war on Iraq, gave them seven billion dollars *without bidding* for contracts in that country. He said that his association with the company had nothing to do with these contracts, on which they immediately began overcharging and cheating the U.S. government. And he, meantime, is still receiving a million dollars a year in compensation from that company.

When Senator Patrick Leahy asked some tough questions about the Halliburton's profiteering in Iraq, Cheney said "Go fuck yourself." So much for accountability by the executive branch of the government.

"That word," as my mother fastidiously referred to it, means nothing to me. I get tired of the canard that it is the acronym of some supposed British navy charge, For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge. Nonsense. It is a cognate of *fikend* in German and *foutre* in French, and it is very very ancient, going back to Indo-European. Furthermore, it is a legitimate word, being the only transitive verb we have for this act, unless you count such euphemisms as "screw" and "bang." You can "make love to" somebody by reading poetry by candlelight. You can "sleep with" somebody and do nothing more than that, sleep. Or you can "go to bed with" somebody to watch *Bambi* on television. But that word is offensive to many persons, and I don't think it should resound above the blue carpet of the U.S. Senate.

There is a close relationship between what we improperly call "profanity" and humor, for both depend for their effect on surprise and, better yet, shock. But "that word" is now so overused in movies that it is becoming offensive for its numbing redundancy. In my school years I worked summers as a longshoreman, as a mill hand, and in construction companies. I worked among some really strong, tough, and often very uneducated men. I don't think I ever heard the word. And as for "motherfucker," I didn't hear that word until I was in my thirties. It was, until approximately the 1950s, heard only among blacks, and it was meant to have powerful shock effect. Now of course it has been so enfeebled by overuse that I wish it would wander off and die. To

use it in a western, and it has been done, is ridiculous. But nothing deters the "young" writers of Hollywood from flagrant linguistic anachronisms. In the Paul Newman-Tom Hanks gangster movie *The Road to Perdition* one of the characters says, "We're outta here." The story is set in 1931.

In any culture, the words, the subject matters, that cause shock are inevitably linked and perhaps synonymous with those that cause laughter. Thus anyone in being funny walks on the edge of being offensive. In Latin America, where the sexual taboos are not as pervasive and powerful as they are north of the Rio Grande, I heard jokes based on religion, which is a more sensitive subject there than it traditionally has been here. At one time, in Québec, the expression *sacré bleu*, or "holy blue," meaning "holy heaven," was fairly strong. But then in England the adjective "bloody" was also strong, because it is a contraction of "by Our Lady."

Lenny Bruce had a close association with jazz. He worked a lot in jazz clubs, opposite jazz performers, and his act was larded with "hip" musicians' slang. His primary fans, indeed, were musicians themselves. The late Grover Sales, who at one time was Lenny's publicist, wrote that Lenny was the first comedian in history to be put on the map by jazz critics, and he specified Ralph J. Gleason, Nat Hentoff, and me as the principle cheer leaders. Lenny was one of the first comedians to become famous through records. This was true of Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, and a few others. All of Lenny's LPs were on the Fantasy label, and recently Terri Hinte, director of press and information for the company, provided me with a full set of them on CDs.

There was an odd symbiosis between jazz and Lenny Bruce, and some writers suggested it was because his material was improvised. Lenny told me that it wasn't. He said that on a very fertile evening, maybe ten percent of it was improvised. But it certainly had the feeling of improvisation, spontaneous hilarious rantings about the world and its denizens. He spoke quickly in a somewhat nasal voice, and you had to pay attention. Anyone unfamiliar with the argot of musicians probably didn't get it at all. Of course, many of those "hip" expressions have passed into general usage. But the language sounded pretty wild in the late 1950s.

Jules Chaikin, the trumpet player and now a prominent contractor in the Los Angeles studios, said, "I loved Lenny. My wife and I used to see him all over L.A. during those early years, the Crescendo, Cosmo Alley, Duffy's Tavern, Peacock Alley, and others, along with Lord Buckley, Mort Sahl, Redd Foxx, Bill Cosby et al, all knocking around trying to break out. Some did, some didn't."

Lenny's monologues were not about sex. About the closest he ever came to that was his description of the kind of girl you just knew wore dime-store panties with the days of the week on them. His monologues dealt with society, and did so with a murderous accuracy. So did Mort Sahl's, but the style and intent were quite different. This earned them the definition as "sick comedians" when in fact it was the society that was sick.

Mort Sahl, with a rolled newspaper in hand, went after the absurdities of society. Lenny went for its jugular vein, and his stuff frequently made audiences uncomfortable. Lenny could make you squirm in your chair, no matter how hard you were laughing.

One of his monologues was *White Collar Drunks*, the kind one encounters in bars. He portrays an aggressive drunk who comes in with his mean dog, says that the bartender is a son of a bitch, then calls him a fascist bastard. On the next stool is another drunk. The word "goddamn" is used several times. "Good legit drunk, Gallo wine man." He calls the first drunk a goddamn Commie, and a fruit, and says, "I think your dog's a fruit too."

Lenny often traveled with a black guitarist named Eric Miller, who acted as his straight man and foil. One of their routines was a take-off on the film *The Defiant Ones*, an excoriation of white racist society. He takes the subject on again in *How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties*, portraying the way suburban white males treat black males they encounter. The man's opening gambit is "That Joe Louis is a hell of a fighter." Then it gets worse. He says, "I don't know these people too well. I think they're Hebes – you're not Jewish, are you? No offense. Some of my best friends are Jews. Come over to the house for dinner. They're all right. Some sheenies are no good, but you seem like a white Jew to me. Yeah. That Bojangles, Christ, could he tap dance. You tap dance a little yourself? All you people can tap dance. You people have a natural sense of rhythm. Born right in you, I guess. The way I figure it, no matter what the hell a guy is, if he stays in his place. That's what causes all the trouble in the world. I mean, well, here's to Joe Louis. The way I figure it, he was just a guy who knew when to get in there and when to get outta there. That's more than I can say for a lot of you niggers. You're all right. Did you have anything to eat yet? I don't know whether there's any watermelon left, or fried chicken, or dice, or razors . . . I'd like to have you over to the house. When it gets dark."

Probably the routine that caused the most gasps – and laughter – was *Religions Inc.*, in which the leaders of the country's major religions are having a board meeting at their

headquarters on Madison Avenue. The chairman addresses them. "I just was talking to Billy this afternoon. I said, 'Billy, we've come a long way. Who'da thought, back in '31. We were hustling baby pictures, singles, siding. We didn't know what the hell we were gonna do . . . The graph here tells the story . . . For the first time in twelve years, Catholicism is up nine points, Judaism's at fifteen. The Big P, the Pentecostals are starting to move, finally . . . Now, gentlemen, we've got new stuff from our religious novelty house in Chicago . . . the genuine Jewish star, lucky cross and cigarette lighter combined, and we've got the kiss-me-in-the-dark mizuzzah, the walk-me-talk-me-whip-me candle, and these wonderful little cocktail napkins with sayings — 'Another martini for Mother Cabrini' — and some pretty far-out things."

The meeting gets a phone call (collect) from the Pope. "Hello, Johnny, what's shakin', baby? Boy, it's sure been an election month, hasn't it, Sweetie? The puff of white smoke knocked me out. We've got an eight-page layout with Viceroy. 'The new Pope is a thinking man.' They wanted to go with the tattoo, but I figured, the hell with it. It would have been too far out. Listen, I hate to bug you again, but they're bugging us with that dumb integration . . . No, I don't know why the hell they want to go to school either. Yeah, that school bus scene. Well, we had to give 'em the bus, but there's two toilets on each bus. They're bugging us. They say, 'Get the religious leaders, make 'em talk about it. I know it, but they're getting hip. They don't want no more quotations from the Bible. They want us to come out and say things. They want us to say, 'Let them go to school *with them*.'

"No, I did walkin' across the water and snake into the cane. They don't want to hear that jazz any more. And that 'Stop War' jazz every time there's a bomb scare . . . Sure they're Commies . . . We've gotta do something! Yeah! Yeah, we've got some people on our side. We've got Scatman Crothers and Steppin Fetchit. It don't do no good. That's why I called you." Another voice: "*Dominus vobiscum* . . ." And the first voice, angrily: "That's easy for you to say, you're over *there*. Yeah, I know. And thanks for the pepperoni. Billy, do you want to say something to him? Billy wants to know if you can get him a deal on one of those dago sports cars. When are you comin' to the coast? Yeah, yeah. I can get you the Sullivan show the nineteenth. Send me some eight-by-ten glossies. Wear the big ring. Oh, did you dig Spellman on *Stars of Jazz*? Okay. Yeah. Okay, Sweetie, yeah. You cool it too. No, nobody knows you're Jewish."

The "Billy" is of course Billy Graham. And Billy Graham was no man to fool with. He managed to suck up to every president in his lifetime, and they in turn sucked up to him, because they feared the religious primitives over whom he had such command. (I have often wondered how many presidents have been atheists but didn't dare admit it, just as Harry S. Truman never confessed to his — egad, effeminate! — knowledge of and ability in classical music. You've just got to keep those pew-fillers conned!)

In taking a swat at Billy Graham, Lenny was playing a dangerous game.

And as for his whack at the Catholic Church:

When I was a young reporter at the *Montreal Star* in the early 1950s, I covered a vicious strike at a cotton mill in Valleyfield, Quebec. The premier of Québec at that time was Maurice Duplessis, a dictator who made Hughie Long look benign. Duplessis was owned and operated by the Catholic church (and vice versa) and by big corporations, and particularly big American corporations. An American company owned that cotton mill. Duplessis sent his Provincial Police, notorious as corrupt goons, into Valleyfield to bear down on the strikers, and they shot one of them (I think it was two, actually). I wrote my story for the *Star*, and of course it was emasculated to favor the company. The *Star*'s owner had immense corporate holdings, such as Brazilian Traction and St. Lawrence Sugar, and you didn't cross him or his friends.

That strike was also covered by *Time*'s Montreal bureau chief, whom I'll call Jim, a fine and conscientious reporter with a distinguished wartime history in the U.S. Navy. Jim filed, as I recall, about 4,000 words to *Time*. It was our joke in the newspaper business that *Time* always wanted more than it would ever print, and in the New York office, they would rewrite and rewrite until they got it wrong. What came out in *Time* was 800 words, but Jim's story was enough to infuriate Duplessis. Duplessis telephoned the Vatican, which called Clare Booth Luce, the fanatically Catholic wife of the magazine's owner, Henry Luce. And Jim was fired. (He went back to the States and got a good solid newspaper job.)

That story is written nowhere except in my skull, but I assure you, what I have told you is the truth. That's how it works, and Lenny tangled with dangerous entities, including the Catholic Church and Billy Graham.

Lenny did a withering satire on doctors and their conspiracy with the pharmaceutical industry. He starts with the story, then in the news, about the child who was stuck in a well for six days. He says, "You can go into any cosmopolitan city and still see in the Classified, 'Orientals may buy

here. Negroes may buy here.' And one schmuck gets caught in a well and everyone stays up for a week" It is of course an acute observation on what the "media" (a term not yet in use) thinks important. "They got the kid out of the well, and the doctor sent a bill. Everyone *flipped* It put so much heat on the AMA."

He imagines a conference at the AMA over the debacle. "Can you come up with a new disease for next year?" "Well, I've been working hard. We're thinking of switching the gripe" "Yeah! What'll we call it?" "Well I just came up with, this is just a working title: Asiatic flu." "Call up the drug company, get some new pills this year. The pinks died last year, completely. Spantules are going very good."

And another routine:

"We take you now to Ike's apartment."

This, remember, is at the time of the scandal surrounding Sherman Adams, who was President Eisenhower's old friend and most powerful personal aide:

"Well, Sherm, you goofed, baby. Let's see, the six iron, I'll make that little putt there. Sherm . . . maybe we can beat this if you tell me now. . . . Let's see, you got a coat, right? And you got the rug. And what did you do in the hotel for two thousand dollars? Now what I want to know is, did you get anything else? Don't lie to me. Because, you know, I won't hit you if you tell me the truth. Get it off your chest now" "Well, I got one more thing." "What's that?" "Delaware." "Oh, how could you take that? You can't do things like that! What's the matter with you?" "I don't know."

"Well how are we gonna get out of this?"

"I got an idea. Laugh at me for saying this. The newspapers are bringing all the heat on us. So if we could think of a headline to sort of wipe it all out, just for four or five days."

"Well, how about getting one of the cabinet members assassinated?"

Then Eisenhower says into the office intercom, "Ciel, send in Nixon." Then, in a robust glad-hand voice, "Hello, Nick Sweetie, sit down, baby Get some of that twelve-year-old Scotch over here. A little Havana, huh, baby? Sweetie."

Nixon, suspiciously, "What's goin' on? Don't put me on, Ike."

"Nobody's putting you on! I've got a great idea for you. How'd you like to go to Lebanon?"

"Why don't you *stop*, Ike? I don't want to go on any more trips."

"Why *not*? Are you kidding, they'll love you over there!"

"They won't love me over there, and I don't want to go. Why don't you send Dulles? He's been home for two days. I just want to stay and see the cherry blossoms."

"Don't get maudlin. I don't know why you don't want to go. You did great in Caracas."

It will be recalled that in May, 1958, Venezuelan crowds threw rocks at Nixon's limousine.

Nixon continues, a whimpering petulant child: "Are you kidding? They *hated* me. They spit at me! Look at this suit. I never had it cleaned"

"I got letters from people who really liked you. I've got a ton of mail on my desk right now."

Nixon, still childlike: "I don't wanna go anyway."

"Is that a nice way to talk to me? Create a monster, is that what I did? The boy I helped? Capped your teeth."

"I don't wanna be ungrateful. I know you were nice to me. If I did good in *one place*"

"You did good in Biloxi."

"Yeah, but I had a lot of people on my side. Father Coughlan"

All but forgotten today, Father Coughlan was a right-wing Catholic priest who had a nationwide radio show — the Rush Limbaugh of his day.

Nixon: "I just don't wanna go anywhere any more."

"Why?"

"They just don't like me, that's all. I'm not gonna fool myself. I just haven't got it, I guess. There's something about my hair, I think."

Eisenhower: "Want me to tell you something? They *liked* you, it's your old lady, Pat. Everybody dug you. It's *her*. She overdresses. Besides, who brings their wife on a trip? You'll go, you're not even gonna fly tourist this time."

You don't think for a moment that Nixon didn't hear that, do you? Nixon was a notoriously vicious and vindictive man who maintained an "enemies list" when finally he got to be president. He destroyed people in his climb to that position, including Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas, an intelligent adherent to the New Deal, who represented the Fourteenth District, which comprised much of Los Angeles.

Nixon went for her throat to get her job. He never actually called her a Communist, but he said she was "pink right down to her underwear," a really classy line from a really classy guy. He left it to his minions to make the direct attacks, a tactic scrupulously followed by the present president. Murray Chotiner, Nixon's campaign manager, printed a flyer in pink that directly linked her to Communism. Nixon won the election; her career was destroyed.

Later, of course, he had his "plumbers" break into various

offices, including that of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and Democratic headquarters at the Watergate Hotel, all of his surrounding staff in perpetual thrall to his raging paranoia. And he was utterly devoid of humor. So you can just bet that Lenny was on his early enemies list.

At Lenny's prime, it was customary to compare him with Mort Sahl. Lenny went far beyond him: he slashed every subject right down to the bone. And if there is one thing tyranny cannot tolerate, it's expository satire.

Ironically, when Lenny did *Religions Inc.*, he could have had no idea how big the fraud would grow with the rise of the television evangelists and the careers of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy ("Ah hay-uv sinned!" choke sob) Swaggart, Oral Roberts, and Jim Bakker, who with his wife operated the Praise the Lord mission and their Heritage USA theme park, which — even as today — conflated pietism with patriotism. At its peak, PTL was taking in \$500,000 a day, and the Bakkers plowed through \$158 million in donations, spending on such things as an air-conditioned kennel for their dog. But Bakker got caught with his hand in the cookie jar when he siphoned \$265,000 to church secretary Jessica Hahn to hush her about their sexual shenanigans. Bakker had forty-seven bank accounts. A jury found him guilty on twenty-four counts. He was fined \$500,000 and sentenced to forty-five years in prison. He was paroled in 1994 and is back at the old stand, with *The New Jim Bakker Show*.

And there were those who thought Lenny's *Religions Inc.* was extreme? It was merely prophetic.

The range of Lenny's material was enormous, from the junky jazz musician who joins the Lawrence Welk band to the genie in the candy store to a satire on prison movies to an airline he called Non-Skeddo to message movies and on and on — anything that struck his fertile imagination and indefatigable powers of observation.

On transcribing some of his monologues, I made a discovery. Much of what he did was funny because of his impetuous delivery, words tumbling out, sentences truncated, and a rapid switching of voices and accents among the characters that anticipates Jonathan Winters and Robin Williams, who I suspect were influenced by him. In fact, Robin Williams comes closer to Lenny Bruce than any of the comedians who descend from him, and in some ways is even more improvisational and inventive. George Carlin tries hard but doesn't come close to Lenny. Dennis Miller fails miserably, in part because of his right-wing politics and concomitant lack of empathy or compassion.

I think that some of Lenny's material wasn't even *meant*

to be funny, especially the routine he did about a cheap Las Vegas comic who gets to play the London Palladium and bombs miserably, blaming the audience and the management of course. It is scathing beyond belief, absolutely embarrassing and absolutely brilliant. You may know nothing about the world of professional comedians, but this character is completely recognizable. It is this desperate humanity that we recognize and feel sorry for even as we hate him.

Lenny said on occasion, "I'm sorry if I'm not very funny tonight. But I'm not a comedian. I'm Lenny Bruce." He had that right.

He was born Leonard Alfred Schneider. During World War II he served in the Navy. He worked in nightclubs in Brooklyn and Baltimore, then moved to Hollywood to study acting. Indeed, I always thought he'd have made a brilliant straight actor. He married a stripper named Honey Harlow, but they were divorced in 1957.

For a time in San Francisco he dated singer Betty Bennett, who remembers him particularly for his kindness. He also went with Annie Ross, then at the first flush of fame with Lambert-Hendricks-Ross.

I met Lenny for the first time in late 1959. I had written something about him in *Down Beat* and he wrote me a thank-you, the first of many notes he would drop to me from his locations on the road. I have a photo of Lenny in an overcoat, sitting on his haunches in front of some sort of shack. On the back it says, "To Gene, from when I was a bum, love, Lenny." I treasure it. When he would play Chicago — usually for one-week engagements — I would hang with him most nights. He stayed at the Maryland Hotel, and I remember long conversations after hours in his room. They were serious conversations; but then Lenny was a very serious, well-read, and thoughtful man.

There is precedent for what Lenny did, but it is not in some comic. It is in Philip Wylie's book *Generation of Vipers*, which, along with Erich Fromm's *Man for Himself* and *Escape from Freedom*, had an enormous impact on young intellectuals in the 1940s and '50s. Wylie was actually a science fiction writer. In 1931 he published a novel called *The Gladiator* whose protagonist has been rendered *in utero* into a creature of incomparable strength. He grows up into a champion of justice with a secret identity, invulnerable to the assaults of his enemies. It seems impossible that Jerry Siegel and cartoonist Joe Shuster hadn't read it when they invented Superman in 1938 while they were still in high school in Cleveland. For two kids, it was a remarkable act of imagination. (They later got screwed out of their rights to the character.) And Superman was the

model for all the other “super heroes” who came later, Batman, Captain Marvel, Captain America, the Flash, the Flame (who could set himself on fire), Submariner, the Green Lantern. Oh yes, I read them — devoured them — all. So Wylie had an enormous influence on the American, and by extension, world culture a good decade before *Generation of Vipers*.

He published *Generation of Vipers* in 1942. The book criticized American society, tearing apart all its institutions from motherhood to the schools to its racism. But there was something universal about it, for I was still a teenager in Canada when I read it, and its excoriation of social hypocrisies obviously had full meaning to me. And it has not become obsolete. My actress friend Dana Wynter (born in Berlin, educated in England and Rhodesia), read it only recently, and tells me she has turned a lot of her friends in Europe onto it. It is becoming, she said, a small cult there.

But 1942, not long after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, was not a good time to release a book so critical of the United States, its mores and morals. Wylie was viciously attacked — for what else? And has anything changed? — for being, you guessed it, unpatriotic. Indeed, unAmerican, a term that annoyed and amused my father, who was English. Can you imagine the French saying that something is unFrench? Or the Swedes that it's unSwedish? It's a term so common that its jingoism goes unnoticed. For that matter, can you imagine a politician in any other western country invoking the name of God? He'd last five minutes.

The great genius of the United States was always, to me, its capacity for self-accusation, self-criticism, self-improvement, and thus social evolution. This is all but gone now, which is quite frightening. But Wylie felt it even then, and in an introduction to a 1955 edition of *Generation of Vipers* (right when Lenny Bruce was really starting) he wrote, almost pathetically, this *cri du coeur*:

“There are a number of dire predictions in this book which have not come true — *yet*. If enough of us understand the logical concepts which make such disasters foreseeable, I think a lot of us might be led to avoid them. It is this thought, that hope, about which I am *most* sincere.

“The learning of science, logic, reason and especially the logic of dynamic psychology, by enough men and women to prevent the needless squandering of a great nation, in which I am one citizen, and the needless death of a great, free people, to whom I belong and whom I try to serve because I love them.”

It is so much truer now than when Wylie wrote it.

It must have been in spring 1959, probably May. Lenny was playing a fancy restaurant in the Rush Street area of Chicago, what Chicagoans call the Near North Side. As I recall, it was directly across the street from the Maryland. He was as funny as ever, and as rough as ever, and as profane as ever. I was at a table — I can see it — just left of the bandstand, which is where he'd had me seated.

It was prom night in Chicago. Late in the evening, a flock of young people came in, the boys uncomfortable in their white dinner jackets and the girls ill at ease in their evening gowns and corsages. This, remember, was in an age when the kind of language for which Lenny was excoriated was not yet used by the young and a kind of casual, perfunctory and even required, copulation among them had not yet come about.

When those kids entered and found their tables, Lenny changed. Not one further word of “profanity” escaped his lips. He did not want to embarrass the boys in front of their girls. He was *still* funny. He just wasn't shocking.

Later in the evening, the boys paid their tabs and left with their girls, but there was one young man at a table near the front who was looking with alarm into his wallet: he clearly didn't have enough money. Without missing a beat, Lenny snapped his fingers in front of the mike, caught the attention of a waiter, pointed to the boy at the table and then at his own chest. The waiter went to the table and whispered to the boy, who, with a look of relief, got up, made an embarrassed thank-you gesture to Lenny, and left with his girl.

No sooner was he gone that Lenny got as “dirty” as ever.

Not too many years later, in Lenny's trial in San Francisco, the prosecuting attorney asked him harshly: “Do you think the word ‘cocksucker’ is funny?”

“Not when you say it,” Lenny replied.

The last time I saw Lenny in Chicago, at a club whose name I forget, two plainclothesmen were sitting at a front table, officiously taping his act. The harassment had begun. Indeed, persecution is the more accurate term.

He was imprisoned in 1961 on obscenity charges. In 1963, he was barred from entering Britain. London is nothing if not subservient to Washington, as the obsequious Tony Blair demonstrates yet again. His show was banned in Australia, whose favorite national word is *fuck*. Some nightclub owners in the United States, fearing police trouble, began denying him employment. In 1962, the United States district Court in San Francisco, in support of a bankruptcy action, declared him a pauper. He still refused to modify his act. He once said, “People should be taught what is, not what should be. All my humor is based on destruction and despair.

If the whole world were tranquil, I'd be standing in a bread line, right back of J. Edgar Hoover."

And J. Edgar Hoover was indeed interested in Lenny. There is a fourteen-page file of letters about Lenny at the FBI. One of them, dated 10/4/65, addressed to DIRECTOR FBI, is from the San Francisco office, and a copy is directed to the bureau's New York office. The letter says that on 10/2/65 "Lennie (sic) Bruce, the nightclub and stage performer widely known for his obscenity" came to the office to claim that there was a conspiracy of the states of New York and California to violate his rights by ignoring decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court on obscenity.

The other memos in this series monitor his court appearances. *Somebody* in Washington was keeping track of his fate. *Somebody* in Washington had the power to get him barred from Britain and Australia. And look whom he had denigrated, the vengeful Richard Nixon.

I had my own reasons for thinking Lenny was the victim of conspiracy: the timing of his trials. He had to keep flying back and forth for his court appearances, and the cost of this was ruinous. I saw him in New York's Village Vanguard, whose owner, Max Gordon, would *not* surrender to police pressures to keep Lenny unemployed. Lenny used every "obscenity" in the book in deliberate defiance. It wasn't even funny. It was desperate, and frantic. At the end, I said hello to him, and he shook my hand, that of a friend. It seems to me he held it as if he were a drowning man, and told me that he had to leave in the morning for San Francisco for yet another court appearance. I never saw him again.

I used to say that Lenny should be taken out of the nightclubs and given a chair of philosophy at some university. When he was arrested in 1964, Norman Mailer, James Jones, and others rose to his defense, calling him a social satirist "in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais, and Twain."

Lenny said on television, during that time of his travail, that the FBI would have him killed. Lenny was found dead in his Los Angeles apartment with a needle in his arm. The police said he died of an overdose of morphine. Morphine, for God's sake? What serious heroin junky would use morphine? I have twice had morphine in hospital stays, and in large quantities, and I find it to be detestable stuff.

Junkies don't die of overdoses. Bill Evans told me that once, in a moment of despair, he tried to commit suicide with an overdose of heroin. Such was his tolerance that he simply slept for a couple of days. There are easy ways to kill a junky. One way is to slip into his heroin supply some of the white corroded powder from the terminals of automobile batteries.

And I will believe as long as I live that the LAPD murdered Lenny.

On listening again to those Lenny Bruce tracks, one of the things that struck me immediately is how clean they are, and certainly in an age when Andrew Dice Clay talked on television about how he enjoys masturbating against a TV screen and watching the product of this exercise run down the glass. I couldn't believe that an audience, and especially the women, actually laughed at that. That was about eleven o'clock one night, when any child could have been watching. Compare this to that demure group of kids that came to see Lenny that night in Chicago. Today the girls have vocabularies like that for which Lenny was crucified. Young people today refer to the blow job as "party sex" and don't take it very seriously. And then there's Jerry Springer, who is actually planning to run for Congress. And we've had *Sex and the City* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, not to mention the propaganda for homosexuality in television and movies. And of course we have the ongoing scandals of pederasty in the Catholic church, and the torrents of pornography on the internet. And then there's that animated cartoon bear who do do his doodoo behind a tree and reaches for the Charmin. Men's room scenes are common. Guys have conferences while standing at urinals. And, in *Eyes Wide Shut*, we were treated to the sight of Nicole Kidman seated on the pot for a pee, reaching for the toilet paper, drying herself, and dropping the paper in the can. In the inescapable fornication scenes in movies, women are usually on top, grinding away to service their supine masters. Women are now mere things.

My late mother said long ago, "Women's lib will liberate men." And it is so. The assault on American society by Gloria Steinem, Hugh Hefner, Bob Guccione, and rockers and rappers and television writers and producers has been successful. We've lived through the adventures of Monica Lewinsky and Paris Hilton. We are beset by ads for Cialis and Senator Robert Dole accepted the money to do commercials for Viagra, which made you picture his Thing raised in Heil Hitler salute as surely as Lewinsky's blue dress made us imagine Bill Clinton's. Furthermore, it made one think of the nether regions of Elizabeth Dole, not the most appetizing image one might conjure.

And Governor Pataki has the gall to "pardon" poor dead Lenny Bruce?

Governor, in the resounding words of the Vice President on the floor of the Senate, "Go"

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