

## BIOGRAPHY

# Missing the punch line

Parish's biography of Mel Brooks pays little attention to the outrageous comic genius that made the man with the 'gift of gab' so famous

## It's Good to Be the King

The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks, by James Robert Parish, John Wiley & Sons, 336 pages, \$30

By Paul Lewis

Missing from this biography of one of the funniest post-war American humorists is the sheer pleasure of encountering Mel Brooks' irreverent, fertile and frequently unrestrained wit. Like a demure chaperone, James Robert Parish provides a chronological narrative that rarely lingers long enough on the jokes, puns and parodies that make his subject worthy of a more detailed and appreciative approach.

Born Melvin Kaminsky, Brooks was the son of first-generation Russian- and Ukrainian-Jewish immigrants – his mother Kitty (Bookman) Kaminsky and his father Max Kaminsky – who came to America as children. As the youngest of four brothers growing up in Brooklyn, New York, Brooks was an adored baby, the “apple of everyone's eye,” who went on to excel in spontaneous performances.

The death of Max Kaminsky at the age of 34 in 1929, when Melvin was only 2 years old, left Kitty to raise and support her sons by working long hours in the garment industry. This unexpected blow, according to Parish, was a formative event in Brooks' life. Looking back at his friend's career, novelist Joseph Heller observed: “There's a side of Mel that will never be fulfilled, no matter how hard he drives himself, and it all goes back to his father's death.” And Brooks himself reflects on the “sadness” and “pain” of never having known his dad.

The habit of indulging his comic inventiveness made young Melvin, in his own words, “the king of corner shtick.” Parish notes that as a boy, Brooks had “the gift of gab – a highly imaginative mind,

a man of 1,000 faces' [and] then start his dramatic countdown: ‘Face number one’ (he would make a crazy grimace that distorted his already unique face), ‘face number two,’” and so on.

Brooks also wrote for early television comedy series. Following a stint in the army at the end of World War II, Brooks wormed and kitzed his way onto the talented team that worked on Sid Caesar's “Show of Shows,” rising to earn as much as \$5,000 a week at the height of this early success and to contribute to such “Show of Shows” spinoffs as “The Imogene Coca Show,” “Caesar's Hour” and “Caesar Invites You.” Predating the establishment of the sitcom as TV's predominant comic sub-genre, these programs featured sketches based on both new and familiar characters. Parish notes that Brooks, who could be abrasive and was often late for writing sessions, was valued for both his own

many ideas and his ability to improve jokes written by others.

In 1960, Brooks worked with Carl Reiner, a member of Caesar's on-air family of comic actors, in recording the “2,000-Year-Old Man” record, which was based on material they had developed by ad libbing at parties. With its intimate and irreverent recounting of crucial moments in history that Brooks's character had supposedly witnessed – a sort of precursor to Forrest Gump but much funnier – the record quickly became popular in part because it offered a wealth of quotable shtick to the alternative youth culture of the American 1960s. Unfortunately, Parish offers only two snippets of the dialogue from this revealing early achievement, far too little to convey a sense of why it caught on.

To partially compensate for this omission, consider Brooks' account of the ancient discovery of “ladies”:

*2,000-year-old man:* “We were so dumb and stupid. We didn't know anything. We

color riff, the 2,000-year-old man explains why, in his “humble opinion,” Saran Wrap is “the greatest thing mankind ever devised”:

*2,000-year-old man:* “You can put a sandwich in it. You can look through it. You can touch it. You can put it over your face and you can fool around and everything. It's so good and cute. You can wrap it up. I love it. You can put three olives in it and make a little one. You can put 10 sandwiches in it and make a big Saran Wrap. Whatever you want. It clings and sticks. It's great. You can look right through it.”

## Making a buck out of Hitler

Of course, one has to hear Reiner's straight-man voice playing off Brooks' loopy diction, which he calls his “peppy words,” to fully appreciate these gags. The Saran Wrap bit ends with Reiner saying, “You equate this with man's discovery of space?” and Brooks responding, “That was good. That was a good thing: finding space.”

At his best when he's reeling off one-liners, Brooks has for decades been the ideal conversationalist, talk show guest



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which inspired his funny, quirky observations. Best of all, Kaminsky's capacity to express his unique outlook on life in an amusing, nonsensical fashion gave him what he craved most – attention.”

## The face that launched a career

Parish follows Brooks through his first “professional” work in his early teens as a poolside “tumbler,” or comedian, in Catskill resorts. “Brooks might announce suddenly to the sun-soaking clientele, ‘I'm

didn't know who was a lady.”

*Reporter:* “Who was the person who discovered the female?”

*2,000-year-old man:* “Bernie.”

*Reporter:* “Who was Bernie?”

*2,000-year-old man:* “One of the leaders of our group. One morning he got up smiling and he said, ‘Hey, I think there's ladies here.’ So I said, ‘What do you mean?’ So he said, ‘Cause in the night I was thrilled and delighted.’ Then he told me such a story it's hundreds of years later I still blush.”

In a similarly hilarious and slightly off-

what's in my heart: Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump.” But Brooks also had a sense of accomplishment about having raised the money to make this audacious film and for having put his outrage about Nazi atrocities to such unusual use. He would go on to boast that, “The Producers” made “me the first Jew in history to make a buck out of Hitler.”

The narrative of Brooks' long career is a roller coaster with more financial flops than triumphs. Among the former, Parish discusses such movies as “Twelve Chairs”





"Hey, I think there's ladies here." The apolitical Brooks has always got away with being outrageous. Clockwise from left: Brooks poses with cast members of 'The Producers' before its London stage premiere, in 2004; Zero Mostel, Gene Wilder and friend, in the original 1968 film version; Brooks yuks it up, in 'Blazing Saddles' (1974)

(1970) and "Life Stinks" (1991), Broadway failures like "Shinbone Alley" (1957) and "All American" (1962), and forgotten television work like "When Things Were Rotten" and "The Nutt House." In addition to the early success of the "2,000-Year-Old Man" and an animated short called "The Critic," successes include the camp TV show "Get Smart" (1965-1970), the cult classic and eventual Broadway hit versions of "The Producers," and the flatulent cowboy sendup "Blazing Saddles" (1974). Unlike Woody Allen, who has crafted romantic comedies from his experiences and obsessions, Brooks is at his best when he is exploding the conventions of known Hollywood directors and genres. Parish does well in following the complex relationship between Sid Caesar and Brooks and in describing Brooks' creative process. Years before he came up with the premise for "The Producers," we are told, Brooks had been sketching a comic novel called "Springtime for Hitler." In the same way, the Jews in Space mock-trailer for the never-to-be-made sequel to his 1981 movie "History of the World, Part One" eventually morphed into "Spaceballs" (1987).

Though never religious, Brooks repeatedly drew on Jewish images and stereotypes in his work – from the heavily accented 2,000-Year-Old Man to Max Bialystock in "The Producers," from the room-service seeking JAP in "Spaceballs" to Rabbi Tuckman (played by Brooks) who replaces Friar Tuck in "Robin Hood: Men in Tights" (1993). Twice Parish quotes Brooks' response to a question asked by Mike Wallace on CBS's news magazine program "60 Minutes": "Yes, I am a Jew. I am a Jew. What about it? What's so wrong? What's the matter with being a Jew? I think there's a lot of that way deep down

genius in them. Such an effort could easily highlight the delightful silliness of these parodies. One thinks of the endless, stentorian passing of Dark Helmet's spaceship at the opening of "Spaceballs"; the rap song in "Robin Hood" that shifts between African American and Elizabethan rhythms and gives a whole new meaning to the line, "Hey! Hey! Hey nonny, nonny and a ho, ho, ho"; and the way the vampire bat with Leslie Nielsen's face in "Dracula" is startled to find himself crashing into a just-slammed window pane. You know you're watching a Mel Brooks movie when you hear dialogue like this:

Harker (about the bitten Mina): "Is she alive?"

Van Helsing: "She's Nosferatu."

Harker: "She's Italian?"

Though Parish manages to convey a sense of Brooks' impulse to put himself forward through comedy as the driving force of his often disappointing, though ultimately triumphant, career, many questions raised by the nature of this work and life are largely left unexplored here. To what extent are Brooks' early experiences and later concerns typical of comedians and comic writers in general? What does Brooks' ability to get films made suggest about the relation between Hollywood and the gifted individual? And where should we situate Brooks' more outrageous bits in relation to the transgressive comedy of other Jewish-American performers and writers from Groucho Marx to Lenny Bruce and Sarah Silverman?

The last of these questions hangs like ripe fruit from the story of this life. Though Parish's account of the Brooks-Caesar relationship captures its flavor and development, little is done with the observation that Brooks came of age professionally in the apolitical world of early American television, as opposed to the increasingly liberated 1960s of Bruce and the almost-anything-goes, niche-marketed comedy world of Silverman's 21st century.

Because Brooks was always just kidding, even his more daring bits (for instance, the comic Nazis in "The Producers," the campfire scene in "Blazing Saddles," and the many sexual innuendoes throughout his work) never drew much criticism. Even, perhaps especially, in the parodies, Brooks' comic arrows land gently on their satirical targets. This allowed Alfred Hitchcock to appreciate "High Anxiety" (1977) and George Lucas to enjoy "Spaceballs." Less personal than Woody Allen and less serious than Bruce or Silverman, Brooks has generally been more interested in getting laughs than in scoring points. Given this, one could wish that Parish had more fully delivered on the topic announced in his subtitle – "The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks" – by sharing more of the funny stuff and by taking it seriously enough to ponder in relation to questions about the origins of comic creativity and the functions of provocative wit.



beneath all the quick Jewish jokes that I do." And Parish notes that Brooks insists that his comedy is rooted in a Jewish sense of "not fitting into the mainstream of American society."

Though Parish is entitled to his own aesthetic preferences, one wishes he had devoted less space to quoting hostile reviews of movies like "Spaceballs," "Robin Hood" and "Dracula: Dead and Loving It" (1995) and more to seeing flashes of comic

Paul Lewis is a contributing editor of Tikkun magazine and author of "Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict."