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STANDUP COMEDY AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: LENNY BRUCE, THE 1950s, AND AMERICAN HUMOR

by

ANDREA SHANNON PRUSSING-HOLLOWELL

Under the Direction of Michelle Brattain

ABSTRACT

Despite the common memory of the 1950s being an intolerant, conformist decade, many "underground" cultures developed and thrived in response to America's homogenized national culture. Lenny Bruce was immersed within these cultures, using standup comedy as a vehicle to express his and his audiences' disillusionment. This thesis aims to place Bruce back in his original context of the 1950s in order to understand why the 1960s youth embraced him as their own. By examining the 1950s underground, the history of standup comedy, and Bruce's comedy, the 1950s youth emerge as an important precursor to the 1960s social movements, and Bruce's martyrdom as a free speech crusader becomes more understandable and tragic.

INDEX WORDS: Lenny Bruce, Standup comedy, 1950s, Humor, Beats, Obscenity, Free speech, Satire

STANDUP COMEDY AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: LENNY BRUCE, THE 1950s, AND AMERICAN HUMOR

by

ANDREA SHANNON PRUSSING-HOLLOWELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2007

STANDUP COMEDY AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: LENNY BRUCE, THE 1950s, AND AMERICAN HUMOR

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1950s, Lenny Bruce worked at a club called Strip City in Los Angeles as emcee. His job description required him to introduce strippers and entertain the audiences between the women dancing with his standup comedy. "Usually, the only attention available was that leering, ogling attention paid to the strippers," which typically left Bruce ignored and heckled to get off the stage.[1] This created the illusion, at least in Bruce's eyes, that he was constantly competing with the strippers for attention. One night, a frustrated Bruce decided to try a different approach to force the audience to notice and listen to him. As a female performer exited the stage, "out came that talented, handsome, witty and vivacious M.C., Mr. Lenny Bruce – *bare-assed naked*!"[2] As the shocked, and silent, audience stared in disbelief Bruce simply inquired, "What are you all staring at? You see nudity on this stage every night. What's the big deal if I get naked?"[3] He then proceeded to perform his standard routine until the next act was ready and exited the stage

For most members of the audience, this antic was probably not a typical aspect of standup comedy, which would explain the shock and silence. The most famous comedians in the 1950s were white men like Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Bob Hope, who had all used standup as a jumping point to enter more lucrative and national venues like radio and television. Standup comedy was not a main attraction, and usually consisted of one act amidst variety shows left over from vaudeville. Albert Goldman states:

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[1] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 137.
[2] Ibid, 138. Emphasis in original
[3] Ibid, 138.

> "Traditionally, comics were always old guys. They'd started out in show business as hoofers, jugglers, musicians or singers. Then one day – to liven up a dull act – they told a joke. Getting a good reaction, they told more jokes. Finally, they ended up carrying the fiddle onstage as a prop."[4]

These men, and increasingly women, performed "clean" comedy, validating their audiences' lifestyles and values by portraying themselves as stumbling failures in everyday life. At times, they would employ euphemisms and veiled adult topics in their routines, but always, their acts ultimately affirmed for their audiences why certain behavior was incorrect.

For example, Bob Hope, one of the most famous and popular comedians of the early and mid-twentieth century, was adept at portraying himself as a bumbling and goofy version of his audiences. He generated sympathy from the audience by portraying an amusing, absurd person who nevertheless seemed just like them. Hope's routines personified comedy in the 1950s with their short quips with one-line punch lines, allowing him to tell five jokes within one minute.

> "I've been keeping in shape by working in my garden. It's nice to have a garden out here. Everything grows so fast. You dig a little hole, throw in some seeds, cover it up, water it twice a day, and before you know it, up comes a gofer. [laughter] I worked on my flowers today … I didn't have a flower pot, so I planted a tulip in an old whiskey bottle. I put it in and when I came out this morning, it was slapping the tiger lilies around. [laughter]"[5]

This type of comedy was standard throughout the 1950s. Comedians made fun of trivial behavior, like gardening, and threw in an absurd outcome of their inability to perform tasks adequately. In addition, behavior that was stigmatized, like drinking, was mocked, allowing audiences to laugh at typically unfunny behavior. Hope's rendition of what whiskey could do, even to flowers, resembled stereotypes about drunks and violence, and the audience's laughter implies their comfort in knowing they were not among those Hope mocked. Hope, and other comedians, built their audiences around the assumption

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[4] Ibid, 102.
[5] Bob Hope, "Joke Page," *Bob Hope Official Web Site*, www.bobhope.com, (accessed March 8, 2007).

that the "primary function" of humor was to encourage a sense of community among the "diverse groups" that made up the audiences.[6] This assumption required comedians to master the ability to perform comedy that large groups could enjoy without offending anyone, or at least without offending anyone too much, and the most successful ones were those who achieved national fame with their "mass humor."[7]

The need to build a large national audience that enjoyed the same humor reflected the general trend of American culture since the late nineteenth century with the creation of a national culture. As more Americans became connected through technology like railroads, films, and mass-circulated magazines, aspects of culture, like fashion, entertainment, music, and novels began penetrating all regions, creating a somewhat homogenized society, at least through consumerism. By the 1950s, this trend was augmented by the economic boom of the post-World War II years and technological innovations that provided Americans with numerous opportunities to consume the same products as those throughout the country.

This time of immense prosperity, however, also raised concerns about the impact of mass culture and many social scientists began arguing that Americans' determination to return to pre-military buildup "normalcy" had created a mass conformist atmosphere. According to Thomas Frank, proponents of this theory argued that "long-standing American traditions of individualism" were vanishing beneath "the sprawls of prefabricated towns, and the reorientation of culture around the imperative of consuming

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[6] Albert F. McLean Jr.. *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 121. Ethnic humor, which had traditionally been a staple in comedy since minstrelsy and vaudeville, created a community between comic and audience based on mocking those not present. As immigration increased in the early twentieth century, comedians had to shift their humor away from blatantly mocking different ethnicities or races because it "began to single out scapegoats" making its appeal limited and no longer mass humor. (121).

[7] Ibid, 121.

homogenized mass-produced goods."[8] Such concerns were perpetuated by the reality that national figures, particularly entertainers, developed bland images that supposedly appealed to all Americans, no matter their race, class, gender, or ethnicity. In addition, the rise of anti-Communism and the subsequent persecution of suspected Communists in the government and entertainment worlds fueled the assumption that conformity was both preferred and safe, while anyone who questioned the majority's standards would be silenced, or at least ignored. All of these issues supposedly created an intolerant society where anyone who could not appeal to the majority, especially in entertainment, would not be able to acquire the type of mass following necessary to gain fame or influence.

However, as the 1950s are increasingly revisited by scholars seeking to place the 1960s Counterculture in its historical context, the underground worlds of bohemia and African American culture have been examined more frequently and closely, challenging the theory of universal intolerance and mass conformity. Numerous alternative cultures developed and thrived parallel to mainstream national culture, undermining the alleged mass conformity and in some ways merging into aspects of mainstream culture. Prominent entertainment figures like James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Elvis Presley appeared to bridge these worlds by popularizing and mainstreaming underground values, rebellion, and music. Despite their critics' claim that these figures encouraged immoral and dangerous activities, their immense popularity within mainstream America illustrate that the mass conformity Americans were concerned with was not as universal or popular as is often remembered.

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[8] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 10. Writers and scholars like David Riesman, William H. Whyte Jr., and John K. Galbraith wrote articles and books warning Americans of conformity, creating, according to Frank, a "building moral panic." (11).

Lenny Bruce attempted the same bridging of American cultures with his standup comedy because he sought national fame, but with his own version of comedy which challenged the traditional understanding of what a comic was and did. The situation described above, for example, demonstrates Bruce's rejection of his job description as a humorous, but temporary, sideline to the primary entertainment of naked women. He repeatedly demanded that audiences *listen* to him because unlike other comedians, Bruce used his comedy to say something.[9] He mocked the audience's fascination with nudity and although he provided a humorous moment by performing naked, he also forced the audience to question why a man's nudity was more shocking than a woman's.

This type of comedy was the basis of Bruce's routines. He made people laugh while simultaneously chiding them for their bourgeois values and ideology that deemed certain actions, words, and topics inappropriate. Rather than appeal to a mass audience by performing the same comedy as his contemporaries, and ignore the diversity of people's race, class, values, and morals, Bruce sought a mass audience in spite of the conventional wisdom that Americans were developing a homogenized conformist society. His personal experiences with the underground and the proliferation of articles, books, etc. throughout the 1950s warning of conformity, confirmed for Bruce that not all agreed with mainstream logic. He encouraged his audiences to reassess why certain situations were uncomfortable and why they reacted the way they did, often times providing them with scenarios that were somewhat realistic and then demonstrating how funny they were.

> "Airplane. Alright. Guy's sitting there, whacked out, asleep. Fly open, completely exposed [laughter] Mmm? Next aisle. Guy's sitting there, looks over, penis there.
> 'Stewardess, can I see you for a moment?' [laughter]
> 'Yes sir? Gum?'
> 'No, uh [laughter] Tell you what, uh, can you get me a pencil and paper please?'
> 'Yes sir.'

[9] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 137.

> 'Thank you.' Dear sir, I am seated across the aisle from you and your fly is open. You're completely exposed [laughter] and I knew this note would avoid any embarrassment. Yours truly, Frank Martin. [laughter] *P.S. I love you*'
> Dopey, right?"[10]

This bit demonstrates the difference between Bruce and other comedians. He created a somewhat plausible and embarrassing situation and mocked the conventions of American society that claimed such a moment should be handled privately so as to avoid uncomfortable recognition of one's public exposure. In addition, the mere fact that Bruce chose to burlesque a realistic concern of Americans, forgetting to zip up, made him different because no other comedian would discuss such an embarrassing mistake. This was not polite comedy, but it was a realistically humorous scenario, and Bruce mocked both the assumption that one should not laugh at an unzipped fly and that it was rude to tell the victim of his or her mishap.

As Bruce's popularity began to rise nationally, it appears that for many Americans, his comedy offered a refreshing departure from traditional comedy, poking fun at the U.S. and its follies in a more abstract manner. Bruce chose behavior that most Americans practiced, whether or not they were aware of it, and ridiculed the logic behind Americans' actions. There were some, however, who believed Bruce crossed a line that other entertainment figures did not, creating a controversy about whether or not he should be censored. As he became more notorious nationally as a "sick" comedian, attacking anything and everything, no matter how inappropriate or sacred the topic was, Bruce's popularity encouraged a simultaneous debate about Americans' right to free speech. Bruce found himself in the middle of the debate, defending his right to provide what he argued was satire and social commentary.

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[10] Lenny Bruce, *To is a Preposition; Come is a Verb*, Knitting Factory, 2000. Italics added to indicate where Bruce altered voice.

He did not begin his career with any intentions of defending his right to free speech. His childhood and early efforts to break into show business provided him with numerous experiences that later provoked him into developing the critical look on American culture that provided the base for his comedy. Bruce grew up in Long Island, a working-class Jewish boy from a divorced family living with his father. He moved around between relatives so that his father could ensure his well being while the latter struggled to regain financial stability during the Depression. Eventually, Bruce gained a reputation among relatives as a "troublemaker, a cheat, a liar, a two-faced flatterer," and quickly became an unpopular houseguest, resulting in his constant shuffling around.[11] His relationship with his mother, Sally Marr, was an unusual one, baring almost none of the characteristics of the traditional mother-child relationship. Instead, Sally was "the no-bullshit buddy who could set him up with a chick, listen to his troubles like a shipmate, … your barrel of fun, lots of laughs, regular guy and a great pal."[12] Despite living in New York City during Bruce's childhood, Sally instilled in him "a terrible ambivalence toward show business," producing contradictory impulses in him to desire fame but also cynicism about the industry.[13]

Bruce did not graduate high school, and instead he ran off to join the Navy during the last two years of World War II where "the alternation of routine and confusion sustained [his] interest."[14] After the war, he quickly tired of the strict regimens of military life, and he began searching for ways to be released, claiming "I didn't put the

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[11] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 82.
[12] Ibid, 93-94. Goldman repeatedly analyzes Jewish parenting, and declares Sally was far from practicing that role until she was older. "In later years, after her own career had pretty well run down and Lenny was coming up fast, Sally began to play the Jewish-mother role to the hilt." (94).
[13] Ibid, 80.
[14] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), 29.

Navy through any red tape coming in, so I felt they should permit me to exit with the same courtesy."[15] He claimed to have found his answer while reading a copy of *Pshchopathia Sexulis*.

> "There it was: A transvestite is a nut who likes to get dressed up in women's clothing. He may never engage in homosexual practice or do anything else antisocial. He's completely harmless. But obviously he would be an inconvenience to the Navy, where they like to keep everything organized by having everyone dress alike. I [Bruce] figured that if I could demonstrate to the Navy that I still had a great deal of patriotism and loyalty to the uniform … rather than indulging myself with the obvious sort of feather-boa negligee and gold-lame' mules drag outfit – then maybe instead of booting me out, they'd open the door politely and escort me out like an officer and a lady."[16]

Although this story was probably embellished later in Bruce's life for his autobiography, it reflects both his style of comedy and his perception of mainstream values. He utilized America's logic pertaining to transvestites' nonconformity to obtain a discharge and mock the military's uneasiness with anyone who did not follow the guidelines of "normalcy." Whether or not he agreed with the military's assessment of transvestites, Bruce had no problem taking advantage of the cultural logic that claimed only certain people were qualified to serve in the military.

Upon leaving the Navy, Bruce moved to New York to live with his mother where he became another regular hopeful, seeking to use standup as a jumping point to writing movies. Originally, he performed a clean act, based on impersonations that were "hokey," essentially the same as "the stock-in-trade" of other comedians.[17] His primary inspiration for what would become his "sick" comedic style was a friend named Joe Ancis, "the original sick comic … a real kamicrazy go-for-broke style comic," who was

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[15] Ibid, 29.
[16] Ibid, 30.
[17] Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Media Fusion, 2002), 15. See also Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*.

too shy to professionally perform.[18] As Bruce regularly interacted with Ancis, he began developing a more informal and improvisational style that ultimately helped him develop his "performance strategy" of talking to audiences "as if he were talking to a room full of friends or just a single bosom buddy."[19] In addition, Ancis introduced Bruce to the underground cultures of African Americans and bohemia through jazz music. He encouraged Bruce to appreciate jazz for the same spontaneity Bruce's comedy developed, but Bruce was never able to "cook" with jazz as Ancis did, but "prized [it] for the status it conferred on its initiates."[20] However, this informal, jazz-like style quickly emerged in Bruce's club acts to ward off hecklers where he became more acidic in his responses than other comedians, making fun of hecklers like he was at a party. For example, his recollection of his first taste of show business states that he intended to perform traditional comedy, but quickly found himself faced with hecklers, prompting him to fall back on the "sick" comedy he informally tossed around with friends like Ancis.

> "[M]y function was quite simple. I was going out there and I was merely to say 'Good evening,' do a few straight lines and introduce the girl singer … 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen –' 'Bring on the broads!' cut me short. Oh, my God, a heckler!… It shocked me into reality … 'Bring on the broads!' This time the request was more positive and energetic. The heckler must have sensed a weak, inexperienced prey. The two girls and the man with him bathed in his reflected glory. His friend joined him and they screamed in unison 'Bring on the broads!' Their lady friends shrieked with ecstasy.
> 'I'd like to, but then you wouldn't have any company at the bar.'
> My first laugh … I was hooked."[21]

Although Bruce began improvising critical humor when dealing with hecklers, his performances maintained the characteristics of straight comedy, leaving him without anything distinct from other comedians. As he realized New York was not providing him

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[18] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 105.
[19] Ibid, 109.
[20] Ibid, 112.
[21] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 38-39. Whereas Goldman devotes an entire chapter to Ancis' influence on Bruce and his comedy, Bruce's autobiography makes no mention of Ancis or any friends in New York with whom he practiced his material on.

with opportunities to succeed, he relocated to Los Angeles where he continued performing the same material that failed him in the east.

The only venues for aspiring comedians in Los Angeles at the time were burlesque clubs, where comedians were expected to perform between stripper acts, accompanied by a jazz band. Bruce found himself immersed in the underground, or alternative, cultures of bebop musicians, their fans, hipsters, and Beats, who came to the shows for the jazz bands, and as he became more disillusioned with the entertainment industry and his chances for success, his comedy began acquiring a sharper edge, resembling the sensibilities of those in the audience. It was in these "'burlesque shithouses'" that he found "comedic liberation," straying from traditional comedy and incorporating the improvisational style he had developed among friends in New York.[22] Bruce revealed:

> "Four years of working in clubs – that's what really made it for me – every night: doing it, doing it, doing it, doing it, getting bored and doing it different ways, no pressure on you, and all the other comedians are drunken bums who don't show up, so I could try anything … I was still thinking in terms of 'bits' – you know, 'I've got my so-and-so bit, and I've got this other bit. I've got two complete shows.'
> Then, after a while, instead of just getting material together little by little it started happening. I'd just go out with not bits … And I really started to become a craftsman, where I could just about structure anything into humor."[23]

As Bruce continuously interacted with the underground, he began building his material around the audience's reactions, and he discovered that comedy provided many alternatives to the straight version his contemporaries practiced. He began ridiculing straight, or mainstream, America and simultaneously celebrated the underground's counter-definitions of morality and decency, allowing him to create a relationship parallel to mainstream comedians and their audiences.

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[22] Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 15.
[23] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 119.

However, once Bruce began gaining mainstream attention, this relationship between comic and audience altered, leaving Bruce in a unique position for a comedian. He blatantly mocked the audience and their values, producing an image of condescension not typically found in standup, making acceptance within mainstream America difficult to acquire. He eventually found himself singled out and prosecuted for using "dirty" words that both his critics and admirers claimed were out of the ordinary from standup. Will Leonard, an entertainment critic for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and apparent fan of Bruce's, enjoyed his comedy because he talked about topics of American life with language "that you and I wouldn't use amid the boys in the back room."[24] However, despite those who appreciated Bruce's discussion of everything from segregation, interracial marriage to profanity itself, he became embroiled in numerous trials to determine if his use of "dirty" words made him an obscene comedian or if they reflected the same frustration and thus expression of an artist. His divergence from traditional comedy meant he did not fit what Americans thought of as a comedian, and yet he also had difficulty claiming he was a satirical artist, which left him with no meaningful way to successfully defend his act. He died a declared pauper by the United States District of San Francisco in 1966, but was posthumously resurrected by the 1960s Counterculture as "the hero" of free speech and an example of how intolerant 1950s culture was.[25]

Unfortunately, this adoption by the 1960s youth culture has created a misunderstanding of Bruce's place in American culture and has exacerbated the tendency to view the 1950s as simply conformist. Rather than being placed within the context of when he performed, the mid and late 1950s, and examined for his historical importance to

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[24] Will Leonard, "When the Blue of the Comic Meets the Gold of the Cabaret …," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 17, 1958, pg. E11.
[25] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 544.

that era, Bruce is often remembered for the 1960s symbol he later became as a result of his obscenity trials. Scholars like Andrew Ross and Neil Schaeffer have examined how Bruce's routines upset the respectability of the 1950s by questioning the conformity running rampant around him, but they do so in the context of his obscenity trials, which occurred in the early and mid 1960s. This implies that Bruce's importance lies within the Counterculture when many cultural movements arose in the late 1960s that challenged the intolerance of an older generation.

Although the 1960s youth culture has rightly been credited with forcing mainstream Americans to rethink social institutions and norms like segregation and gender roles, it is often overlooked that the youth of the 1950s laid the groundwork from which the 1960s emerged. Bruce's popularity and obscenity trials were a few examples among many that not all were content with the United States in the 1950s, and that changes were occurring. The sexual revolution of the late 1960s was largely an outcome of the challenges and changes to "America's sexual status quo" that occurred in local communities throughout the 1950s.[26] Beth Bailey argues that "[s]ome of the most important elements of the sexual revolution were unintended consequences of actions with quite different goals."[27] Without the numerous challenges of young people in the 1950s, such as demanding contraceptives be made available for married couples and engaging in premarital sex despite its "blatant violation of the unwritten but powerful rules," the 1960s youth would not have been as effective in their "Revolution" because they would not have had the wave of changes that began a decade earlier.[28]

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[26] Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.
[27] Ibid, 7.
[28] Ibid, 75. See also Oliver Harris, *Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel: Homosexuality and Beat Textual Politics*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van

For example, the 1960s youth culture's use of obscenity as a weapon to gain attention and the Gay Liberation Front's "request to be recognized as a student organization" on local college campuses might not have been so successful in obtaining tolerance if not for Allen Ginsberg's defense of his poem *Howl* in 1957, or the Beats' portrayal of homosexuality as natural.[29] Ginsberg's public declaration of his "sensual desire and spiritual knowledge" in *Howl* blatantly promoted the acceptance of alternative lifestyles like homosexuality.[30] Lawrence Ferlinghetti's defense for publishing *Howl* as a work of art opened the debate that later allowed the 1960s youth to verbalize their challenges and expand the parameters of free speech and expression. Bruce's comedic style would be admired and copied by later comedians like George Carlin and Richard Pryor, and his trials, although defeats, also effectively demonstrated how malleable the concept of obscenity was, again opening the door for later redefinitions of what constituted free speech.

This is not to say that Bruce' obscenity trials were not important. Rather, to understand why Bruce's challenge to American cultural norms failed, one must first put him in context. It is important to examine his performances and his relationship with his audiences to understand what he did and said, and more importantly, why this was considered "indecent" when so many other cultural practices were yielding to challenges in the 1950s. His primary audiences were those who watched him hone his act and develop the sharp wit he was later prosecuted for, but his targets were typically mainstream Americans and institutions. Chapter one looks at his relationship with his

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Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999); and Peter B. Levy, *Beating the Censor: The "Howl" Trial Revisited*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999).

[29] Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, 178.

[30] Oliver Harris, *Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel*, 227.

early audiences, placing Bruce in his historical context, the 1950s alternative cultures of bebop jazz, hipsters and the Beats. Doing so provides the reader with a better understanding of how and why his comedy developed, and its reception by the audience. Bruce built a "community" with these people, forming the framework from which his later comedy developed. Examining the similarities between Bruce and the underground illustrates the importance of the 1950s as the foundation from which the 1960s youth culture emerged and places Bruce back where he belongs, as an example of social discontent in the 1950s "conformist" culture.

Once he became nationally known, his community expanded and Bruce no longer had assurance that he was speaking to like-minded individuals. Whereas his earlier audiences appreciated his comedy because it resembled their interpretation of American cultural logic, mainstream audiences were not accustomed to his blunt style of discussing private issues, and for some it appeared shocking, disrespectful, and inappropriate. Chapter two examines how Bruce's relationship with his early audiences ultimately led to his rejection within mainstream America. As the relationship between Bruce and audience changed, so too did Bruce's comedy in response to the challenge of maintaining popularity with his particular humor. He was aware of this challenge and this can be seen in the ways that his comedy changed through the inclusion of disclaimers and warnings about his shocking material. However, the roots of his comedic performance did not change, and he was unwilling to go back to "clean" material. This ultimately made his transition into mainstream popular culture more difficult, and audiences and the general population appear to have been unable to fully accept him.

In 1961 Bruce found himself defending his right to free speech and claiming his comedy was satire, and therefore, art. Despite the fact that he lost most of his court battles, Bruce laid the groundwork for later comedians to argue that they had First Amendment protection. In the 1950s, however, despite evidence that American obscenity laws were changing, standup comedy was not an entertainment form deemed worthy of free speech protection. Chapter three aims to try and understand why this was and how the history of standup and Americans' assumptions of comedy, commentary, and criticism all may have played a role in his inability to acquire the label artist. In order to begin to grapple with why Bruce was targeted for obscenity, the history of standup and how Bruce both followed and altered the genre needs examination. Most Americans, whether fans of his or not, seem to have had assumptions about standup and its purpose, and Bruce challenged those assumptions by performing comedy that was critical and satirical at a time when standup was normally affirming and satire was normally written.

Ultimately, examining Bruce through a historical lens enables us to understand that the 1950s was not the exclusively intolerant, conformist decade it is so often remembered as. In addition, although Bruce is rightly credited with changing the genre of standup comedy by introducing more political and critical humor, his contributions go beyond just discussing marriage or racism. He altered the comedian-audience relationship by performing more casually than previous comedians, creating an atmosphere of intimacy. This informal relationship was appreciated by the youth of the 1960s, and they embraced Bruce and this new standup comedy, claiming it for their own. Bruce was posthumously remembered as a trailblazing comedian who challenged the

status quo and ultimately forced Americans to redefine the parameters of free speech. However, to understand why this occurred, Bruce, standup comedy, and the 1950s have to be examined in their historical context.

CHAPTER TWO

LENNY BRUCE AND HIS AUDIENCE: THE 1950S, THE UNDERGROUND, AND AMERICAN HUMOR

Despite beginning his career following in the footsteps of comedians before him, Lenny Bruce was initially unable to build a following of fans because nothing about his routines stood out, or made him different from his contemporaries. As the audiences in Los Angeles continued ignoring him, Bruce began altering his comedy, establishing an informal style that reflected his disillusionment and his recognition that the audiences did not care what he said. Albert Goldman states:

> "Precisely at the moment when he sank to the bottom of the barrel and started working in the places that were the lowest of the low, he suddenly broke free of all restraints and inhibitions and disabilities that had formerly kept him neatly mediocre and began to blow with a spontaneous freedom and resourcefulness that resembled the style and inspiration of his new friends and admirers, the jazz musicians of the modernist school."[31]

He began "punch[ing] up his material with dirty jokes" and quickly concluded that "[w]hat the people want is dirt" and catering to those desires endeared him with those present.[32] He did not limit himself to sexual jokes, as the term "dirty" would imply. Rather, Bruce began mocking everything traditional comedians left alone and developed his humor parallel to that of his audiences, who were typically members of the underground. Once he began mocking mainstream American beliefs, logic, and values, Bruce realized his audiences consisted of like-minded people who rejected mainstream standards and these people emerged as his primary audience, embracing him and his comedy.

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[31] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 133.
[32] Ibid, 126.

As Bruce honed his act to reflect the attitudes and philosophies of his audiences, he quickly established himself as an underground comedian, performing political and satirical comedy that spoke to his audiences' sensibilities. Without this initial following, Bruce would have remained an obscure comedian performing the same comedy as everyone else. Who were these people who popularized Bruce and his comedy, and what was it he provided them with? What did his standup profess, or argue, that amused the underground, and created this unique relationship between audience and comedian? Ultimately, Bruce represented a wider discontent within American society. He was a product of the underground, finding success with his decision to perform material reflective of their attitudes. He would not have found such receptive audiences had he not provided them with affirmations of their point of view about America's direction. Bruce's comedy demonstrates that the supposedly conformist 1950s produced many divergent and contradictory lifestyles, and many refused to give their consent to traditional values and sought recognition as viable alternatives to mainstream America.

The 1950s are often remembered as a time when most Americans sought out normalcy and middle class status, characterized by owning a home, having a family, and securing financial stability. Those who participated in America's upward mobility are often remembered as the Greatest Generation, people who came of age in the 1940s, fought in World War II, and afterwards, established "the largest middle class in U.S. history with the niftiest conveniences."[33] They created suburbs, had babies, and participated in consumerism, hoping to establish a permanent, affluent, family oriented society. Despite the nostalgic memories of a simpler time where everyone shared

[33] Douglas Brinkley, *The United States in the Truman and Eisenhower Years*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, eds. Cornelis A. van Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (VU University Press, 1999), 25.

common goals, alienation and disillusionment developed. The Cold War and mass-production of commodities created a superficial conformity that many believed masked serious socio-economic problems. "Partly as a response to the tumultuous historical events of the Cold War, the United States' bloody efforts to curtail global expansion of communism, and partly as a reaction against self-complacent conformity at home," many Americans began seeking alternative lifestyles outside mainstream culture.[34]

These Americans were primarily young people, and while not all young people became disillusioned, and not all of those old enough to participate in rebuilding and enjoying the economic boom did so, those who were disillusioned created alternative cultures which together formed the underground. "Brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war," these people sought alternatives to the conformity they were expected to participate in because "they distrust[ed] collectivity."[35] Different methods developed within the underground for expressing the rejection of mainstream standards of morality, decency, and eventually, art and music. Some found a voice in the unconventional poetry and prose of the Beats and the jagged, unpredictable scat of bebop. Eventually, the "realistic comic exploitation of the incongruities between overt social values … and … covert impulses" found its most powerful expression in black humor, essentially providing multiple avenues for artists, musicians, writers, etc to express their frustrations with mainstream America.[36]

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[34] Ann Charters, *Introduction: What Was the Beat Generation?*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xix.
[35]John Clellon Holmes, *This is the Beat Generation*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 223-4.
[36] Hamlin Hill, "Black Humor: Its Cause and Cure," *Colorado Quarterly*, 17 (1968): 62.

This disillusionment first found expression in jazz, particularly bebop, which emerged in the early 1940s. "Compared to the swing jazz, from which it grew, bebop was a conversational music, played best in small ensembles rather than in big bands."[37] The popularity of swing music in the early 1940s resulted from decades of influence across the color line, creating large bands of musicians as the only viable option for supporting oneself financially. Big band leaders, such as Benny Goodman, were the decision makers for when, where, and what the bands played leaving little autonomy for the musicians. In addition, dancehalls, clients, etc., also demanded certain music be played, and without small venues, musicians had little freedom in creating new sounds.

Bebop thus exploded out of jam sessions that became a popular way for musicians to creatively express, and experiment with, jazz in a manner that "was [later] interpreted as a proto-political attitude not only towards the exploitative conditions of working in the entertainment business, but also towards the possibility of an autonomous expression of black culture."[38] Musicians met after shows simply to play together, developing the improvisational style that became bebop's trademark. The music "deliberately … refuse[d] to charm mainstream audiences and … consciously … resist[ed] popularization," and thus manifested the musicians' dismissal of "normal" standards of music.[39] Jazz suddenly established an alternative existence outside mainstream popular culture because bebop did not produce the same melodic beat that was popular with the mainstream. Those who admired bebop welcomed the autonomous creativity of playing in small ensembles and enjoyed the breakout solos of musicians like Charlie Parker and

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[37] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 179.
[38] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 78.
[39] Robert Holton, *"The Sordid Hipsters of America:" Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed, Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 22.

Duke Ellington because "the nature of improvisation demands full mastery of the instrument so that the performer has at his or her disposal a vast vocabulary of musical phrases from which to draw at any given moment."[40] This separated jazz as commercial leisure, presumably mainstream America's preference, from bebop, which was an aesthetic art symbolizing the musicians' creative autonomy.

Celebration of bebop's symbolic meanings occurred primarily within the alternative cultures of the hipster, and later the Beats. While the hipster was originally viewed as a petty criminal, most likely African American or a white person with ties to an interracial community, he quickly gained sympathy as an oppressed, and yet liberated, member of society. He was immortalized as the "American existentialist," or a "street intellectual" who understood death as imminent and saw no value in participating in mainstream America's drive for "normalcy."[41] Hipsters dwelled on the periphery because they engaged in activities that countered mainstream America's definition of "growing up," such as drug use, not getting married, and making a living outside the legitimate marketplace, often in petty crime. Hipsters were celebrated as coming "out of a muted rebellion of the proletariat" and were seen as "the lazy proletariat[s]" with no desire "given to manual labor unless [they] ha[d] no choice."[42] Despite the reality that hipsters were typically "criminals" because, as African Americans or self-designated outsiders, they did not have, or refused, access to traditional avenues of upward mobility, they were transformed into symbols of American contradictions. The U.S. purported to

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[40] Amor Kohli, *Black Skins, Beat Masks: Bob Kaufman and the Blackness of Jazz*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 108.
[41] Norman Mailer, *The White Negro*, In *The Sixties Papers: Documents of a Rebellious Decade*, eds. Judith Clavir Albert and Stewart Edward Albert (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 95. Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 115.
[42] Norman Mailer, *Hipster and Beatnik*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 330.

represent freedom and equality throughout the world while Jim Crow was prevalent within U.S. borders and Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a crusade against all suspected communists. For those who transformed the hipster into an icon, his actions expressed the denial of any responsibility for the chaos of mainstream America because the hipster had not participated in its creation.

As hipsters became increasingly recognized as one of bebop's primary audience, and bebop represented an affront to mainstream society because it "removed jazz from the center of popular culture," the disillusionment with postwar America's contradictions quickly found another outlet of expression through the youth culture of the Beats.[43] The alienation demonstrated by both the hipster and the Beats was interpreted, by both critics and followers, as "a personal and psychological condition," rooted in cultural changes rather than political or economic alienation associated with the 1920s and '30s.[44] This "youth" culture argued that middle-class goals were achieved at the expense of truly enjoying life and were in need, therefore, of revision.[45] In addition, they condemned the continuous drive for financial success as hypocritical because so many people, particularly African Americans, were excluded from the possibility of achieving such goals. In response to the expectation that they should "grow up," hipsters and Beats created alternative cultures, determined to live without the values, institutions, and thus, contradictions of mainstream America.

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[43] Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), 191.
[44] Robert Holton, *"The Sordid Hipsters of America*, 14.
[45] Mel van Elteren, *The Culture of the Subterraneans: A Sociological View of the Beats*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), 64. Van Elteren emphasizes that those who made up the Beates ranged in age, roughly eightenn to twenty-eight. "Yet a significant minority … were in their thirties and forties around 1960, displaying a cult of youthfulness." (64).

The underground's participants eschewed legitimate mainstream venues of debate like journals and publishing, and expressed their values and logic through art, music, and poetry that rejected mainstream conventions, and represented the desire to live outside mainstream American culture. The underground developed a jaded understanding of what constituted art, and those who preferred bebop over traditional jazz recognized its aesthetic values and viewed themselves as hip. Authentic appreciation of bebop illustrated one's awareness of mainstream America's emptiness spiritually, morally, and artistically. "To be hip, after all, was to be 'in the know,'" possessing knowledge "linked to the practices of high art and scholarship through a respectful but mock imitation" of mainstream institutions.[46]

Bruce assumed he was hip because he too recognized the contradictions of mainstream America, portraying himself as a hipster who "cooked" with African Americans and their culture. He established himself as a comedian who humorously deconstructed mainstream logic, pushing it to its logical conclusions, and demonstrating its incongruities, as if in a private conversation with the "hip" audience. His bit "Would You Want One of Them to Marry Your Sister" mocked the argument white segregationists traditionally used against white liberals, claiming that despite defending African Americans as equal, liberals did not believe equality was so imperative that interracial marriage was permissible. At the same time, Bruce immediately confirmed to the audience that they were not among the group he mocked. This reassurance generated conversation between Bruce and the audience where he poked fun at hypocrites, and the audience's laughter encouraged him to continue his rant.

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[46] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 81.

> "Now, here is a good summation on the cliché 'Would You Want One of Them to Marry Your Sister.' Now I would like to do this, now – and – It's no *tour de force* to do integration [laughter] and pro-integration in L.A. because we assume you are integrationists – because of economics. Alright, now. So I say, where can I really do that it'll count? Mobile, Alabama. [laughter] Then if I've got any balls, I'll do it *there* right? [laughter] Okay, I'm gonna do it in Mobile [laughter] Then I want to do if for – and I am being objective – the Ku Klux Klan. Again, there's no good or bad. They are part of their environment.
> Okay, so now I tell 'em … You are white … a man forty years old, and now you have a choice – and if you don't think this is logic you can burn me on the fiery cross. This is the logic: You have the choice of spending fifteen years married to a woman – a black woman or a white woman. Fifteen years kissing and hugging and sleeping real close on hot nights, [laughter] watching her take off her garter belt, [laughter] taking her make-up off, seeing every facet of her – fifteen years – with a *black black* woman, or fifteen years with a *white white* woman. And these two women are about the same age bracket, so it's not an unfair comparison. Fifteen years with a black woman or fifteen years with a white woman.
> *The white woman is Kate Smith [pause] and the black woman is Lena Horne!* [laughter]
> So you're not concerned with black or white anymore, are you? [extreme laughter] You are concerned with how cute, how pretty. And if you are concerned with how cute or how pretty, then let's *really* get basic and persecute *ugly* people. [extreme laughter] Not black or white, cause you see, it's a façade, man.
> And now, as far as your sister is concerned, you can assume that your sister, boy, when she searches her soul, she will jump over fifty Charles Laughtons to get to one Harry Belafonte."[47]

Bruce logically followed segregationists' argument, which should have concluded that marriage with unattractive people of one's race was preferred over interracial marriage, as Kate Smith was an overweight white woman. The audience's laughter reflected his assumption that he performed for like-minded people who had evolved beyond both segregationists' and white liberals' hypocritical fear of interracial marriage unless beautiful people, particularly celebrities, were involved. The audience's awareness of this contradiction allowed them to believe they did not think the same way, which is why his reference to Mobile, Alabama was funny. Their response encouraged Bruce to continue mocking those who would not see the contradiction, producing a feeling of a private joke between him and the audience because all recognized he was not talking about them.

It was this type of moral and ethical deconstruction that led to Bruce's success within the underground. Most people who participated in the celebration of bebop,

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[47] Lenny Bruce, *To Is a Preposition; come Is a Verb*, Knitting Factory, 2000. Emphasis added to indicate where Bruce stressed a word or sentence.

attended poetry readings, and questioned the Cold War mentality were young people. As these young people began spending money, they sought out spaces friendly to them and separate from their elders. The Beat enclaves, jazz clubs, and coffeehouses that became popular congregation sites for young people represented "attempts to appropriate or subvert traditions that used spatial location as a way to authorize privilege."[48] It was in these places that blacks and whites could interact freely, gender roles could be experimented with, and authority figures could be challenged through poetry readings, foul language, and laughing at comedy that mocked the status quo. These spaces allowed those who congregated to develop a sense of solidarity, defining themselves in reference to that space. According to Margaret Kohn, "the function of a space emerges from its relationship to other spaces in the way that it reinforces or challenges the dominant concentrations of power."[49] Beats, hipsters, and jazz musicians did not want to participate in mainstream culture as it existed, and their constant attendance at these sites demonstrated this to their peers and to those outside.

Bruce interacted with these people in predominantly small venues located in Beats enclaves sprouting up in major cities. These venues provided intimate settings with immediate interactions, and Bruce quickly "forge[d] a communit[y]" with his audience.[50] Comedians traditionally built an audience around the assumption that they performed for like-minded people, creating a community. This is illustrated by minstrelsy where white audiences laughed at white comedians ridiculing stereotypical African Americans. However, minstrelsy's "roots were in the plantation, an institution that was

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[48] Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 23.
[49] Ibid, 90.
[50] Ibid, 3.

fundamentally altered by the Civil War" causing the genre to lose some of its allure because it seemed antiquated as the U.S. was progressively more urbanized and ethnically more diverse.[51] The "community" changed as more immigrants began attending shows and African Americans were able to perform forcing comedians to redirect their humor towards more ambivalent and subtle characteristics so as to create a new audience based on the same assumption of community, despite the rise in audience diversity. Because Bruce interacted with his audience in small venues in Beat enclaves, his "community" resembled the white audiences of minstrelsy and he could feel some assurance that those outside the community were not present.

Bruce thus established a traditional comedian-audience relationship with his primary audience, and this can be detected in his early albums, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, volumes One* and *Two*, released in 1958 and 1960, respectively. He parodied those outside the community, inviting his audiences' scrutiny of, and laughter at, the outsiders' shortcomings. For example, he performed a bit mocking mainstream Americans' stereotype of drunkenness, which associated it with bums or disreputable people. According to Bruce, this definition denied the fact that there was an equally well known stereotype of a middle-class drunk, distinguished primarily by his class pretensions which led him to act as though he were not drunk.

> "Years ago, a very inventive comic by the name of Red Skelton did a bit called Guzzler's Gin, and this was funny. This kind of drunk, with his shirt out and his hair in front of his face. But unfortunately, most comics say, 'Well that's the drunk to do,' and they all do that drunk. And they don't see that kind of a drunk. The drunks that they don't report are café drunks that they see time and time again. I call them White Collar Drunks [laughter]. Now, the best part of these guys is not when they're in the club watching a show. It's when they first come in because they're really juiced outta their nut … But they don't want to be associated with drunks and they just walk extra cool [laughter] … So no one knows that they're loaded. They think they're impeccably dressed always, clean shaven, buffed nails, whacked outta their skulls.
> Drunk: [slurred voice] 'You think I'm drunk don't you?' [laughter]

[51] Jim Cullen, *Art of Democracy*, 119.

> Bartender: 'No mister, you look perfectly sober.'
> Drunk: 'You God damn right I am [laughter]. Listen budder. Hey why don't ya stop wipin' those glasses for a minute and listen to me [pause] Or do you want some trouble, mm? [laughter] Want a little trouble, glass wiper, uh? [laughter] Don't ya think it's time that the house bought a drink?' [laughter]
> Bartender: 'Well gee mister, you just walked in here.'
> Drunk: 'Boy, you're a real Milton Berle, aren't ya, uh? [laughter] Television, all those jokes. [laughter] Listen, I uh – Hey why don't you listen to me for a minute, alright. Pretty arrogant [mumbles] son of a bitch [laughter] Hey, I'm talkin' – You wanna listen or wanna little trouble ya son of a bitch. I'll give it to ya, uh [laughter] – You want the old one-two, you'll get it. [laughter] It's the old zippo bang and that's what it is. [laughter] What I wanna talk to you about, if you'll listen, is my dog. He's the most vicious dog in the whole world.'
> Bartender: 'I bet he is.'
> Drunk: 'You better God damn believe it mister. [laughter] This dog – did you take my drink away?' [laughter]
> Bartender: 'Hey you didn't order yet, alright.'
> Drunk: 'Yesterday, he killed six cocker spaniels … and a school bus [laughter] – My father is very wealthy. [laughter] And he can be pretty rotten if he don't get a drinky winky, [laughter] get it eh? [laughter] You son of a bitch you. [laughter] He's ready to go and so am I [laughter] … Fascist bastard. [laughter]"[52]

The audience's laughter assured Bruce that his portrayal of a middle-class drunk, as implied by his decision to call them white collar drunks, was an accurate portrayal of a "real" drunk, familiar to everyone, who nevertheless felt compelled to deny his drunkenness. The laughter implies that both Bruce and the audience believed these people were outside their community because within the underground, no such regulations pertaining to one's image existed. Bruce solidified camaraderie with the audience by reminding them that drinking was popular within the mainstream, but within the underground, they did not have the same hang up about appearing drunk. Bruce established an informal relationship with his audience based primarily on their laughter. He experimented with his humor, tailoring it to their reactions, producing an improvisational style that generated the image of intimate conversation with the audience. This style hinted at the possibility that many agreed with him, at least privately. Bruce revealed "I know a lot of the things I want to say; I'm just not sure exactly when I will

[52] Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, vol. Two*, Fantasy Records, 1960.

say them," creating an intimacy through spontaneous recitation and laughter, similar to how a private conversation would develop.[53]

This informal interaction allowed Bruce to adjust his comedy based on how the audience reacted. His concerns reflected the underground's concerns, particularly the Beats,' and their laughter further encouraged him to continue developing the critical edge that appeared similar to Beat sensibility. Like Bruce, the Beats also imagined themselves akin to African Americans and hip to their culture, particularly bebop, because both resided outside of mainstream society. According to Morris Dickstein, "it was [the] … improvisational freshness, complexity, and spontaneity [of bebop jazz] that the Beats … recreate[d] in their own prose and poetry."[54] The Beats challenged the notion that certain topics, values, mores, and lifestyles were wrong while others were correct and moral, especially when moral and good values demanded the mass conformity they saw present in American culture and politics. Writers like Allen Ginsberg argued that "the paranoid style of American politics responded to a stalemate conflict of global dimensions [the Cold War] by waging domestic war" on anyone who sought happiness outside the standard norms.[55] Ginsberg argued:

> "Deviants from the mass sexual stereotypes, quietists, those who will not work for money, or fib and make arms for hire, or join armies in murder and threat, those who wish to loaf, think, rest in visions, act beautifully on their own, speak truthfully in public, inspired by Democracy – what is their psychic fate now in America? An America, the greater portion of whose economy is yoked to mental and mechanical preparations for war?"[56]

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[53] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), 57.
[54] Morris Dickstein, *On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), 34.
[55] Oliver Harris, *Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel: Homosexuality and Beat Textual Politics*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), 222.
[56] Allen Ginsberg, *Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 222.

Rather than adhere to the complicated rationalizations and definitions of mainstream ethics, the underground culture preferred simpler explanations for what constituted proper and moral behavior, concluding that actions that were enjoyable were not wrong or immoral.

Sex, for example, was viewed within mainstream America as private and somewhat shameful, and as something that must be hidden. This was in spite of its role in creating the nuclear family, which Americans insisted rooted a moral society. The underground culture of bebop, Beats, and hipsters continuously rejected the notion that sex was shameful. In reality, most young Americans in the 1950s, according to Beth Bailey, "violate[d] both the spirit and the letter of the law in sexual matters," by engaging in supposedly immoral and shameful sexual practices, even if they professed to hold other values.[57] Bruce argued against the contradiction that even though most "sexually mature but unmarried adults" participated in sexual behavior, they still promoted its secrecy and shamefulness by not openly discussing sex or admitting they had sex.[58] He claimed that curiosity about sex, or simply lustful desires, did not make sex dirty, and that most Americans who had sex while claiming it was shameful should be more honest, like the underground, about their behavior and values.

> "But we don't agree that it's [sex] a nice act. It's a filthy, dirty act. In fact, that's what any eighteen-year-old chick or thirty-year-old chick will tell you when you take her out:
> 'You don't *love* me, you just want to *ball* me.'
> *Boy!* Listen to that:
> Girl: 'He was a *nice* guy – he didn't try to fool around with me. But *you* don't love me, you just want to ball me.'
> Guy: '*What*? Of course I love you – I wouldn't want to sleep with you if I didn't love you.'
> Girl: 'No, no. If you loved me you'd drive me to Wisconsin; punch me in the mouth; read the Bible to me all night; you'd borrow money from me. You wouldn't want to ball me. You don't do that to someone you love – you do that to somebody you hate. Really *hate*.'
> In fact, when you *really* hate them, what's the vernacular we use?
> *Screw you*, mister!

[57] Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47.
[58] Ibid, 49.

> If you were taught it was a sweet Christian act of procreation, it was the nicest thing we can do for each other, you'd use the term correctly, and say,
> *Un*screw you, mister.
> But the best people in the tribe don't do it."[59]

Bruce, and the underground he represented, disagreed with the strict guidelines surrounding appropriate sex or sexuality. According to mainstream logic, sex was only permissible between married couples in love and not between two people who lusted after each other. Bruce observed that if sex *was* only performed when in love, it would not be shameful. Rather, it would be another expression of one's love, applauded and revered like marriage. Pointing out that sexual connotations were used for insults revealed this contradiction. Acting on one's lust meant one was incapable of controlling one's impulses. The underground disagreed with this logic as is demonstrated by their acceptance of premarital sex, and in the continuous portrayal of lust in their writings as natural, pleasurable, and therefore, appropriate to act on.

Bruce, and to a certain extent the Beats, observed that America's denial of sex as pleasurable resulted from conflicting models of appropriate sexuality, creating a tendency to simply ignore the reality that sex occurred, and frequently. Attaining the American Dream required Americans engage in sex for procreation, and this view promoted parenthood as the ideal pursuit of correct living. Bruce observed that if "the best people in the tribe don't do it," meaning religious leaders, and they were held up as exemplars of morality and holiness, to pursue the American Dream required sex to be hidden and private because it demonstrated one's inability to achieve the same morality and holiness.[60] The Beats argued against such bipolarity by converting to Buddhism and refusing to participate in the nuclear family. Bruce also frequently questioned such logic

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[59] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, ed. John Cohen (London: MacMillan, 1972), 39.
[60] Ibid.

by analyzing how the dual models often collided, creating confusion about sex and its appropriateness.

> "'Cause every religious leader is above those physical pleasures. That low carnal lust that is in man. Some attain that spiritual scene of celibacy. That's what a good religious leader is, a celibate. One who abstains from all – is that pure. So if he is there, then you who are involved in that are lower. Some day we'll be good enough to stop doing that dirty thing [laughter] … Well I can't buy that man, 'cause that's a paradox. That's what I am here for, to recreate."[61]

Bruce claimed that holding religious leaders up on a pedestal as the most Christ-like created a disconnected relationship between people and their religion. Those who engaged in sex, even in the correct setting of a marriage and missionary position, were unable to be Christ-like, ultimately making celibate leaders unable to empathize with laypeople. They were supposedly above sin, and therefore, could not understand the temptations of daily life. Moreover, given the centrality of sex to most other people's lives, as members of nuclear families, which were, after all, organized around sex, religious leaders were far removed from such realities and unapproachable.

This estrangement reenacted itself between parents and children, creating the same dual models, and thus confusion. Parents raised their children with no discussion of sex because it was shameful, and often times portrayed themselves as celibate. In the confusion of defining sex, parents also became unapproachable because although it was necessary to create their children, it was still dirty, or at least private. This left children without any guidance on how to approach and handle sex. Bruce raised this issue often, encouraging parents to consider the possibility that their children were interested in sex and the consequences of their fears of discussing it with their parents.

> "'Dear Abby … I'm fourteen years old and I really come from a good religious home. My father really gave me a good upbringing … There were never any dirty words in the house and it was really pure, and now she goes – there were no dirty words, uh, I couldn't, uh, talk to my father to much about anything about dirty words related to … Anyway, uh, I met this boy this summer. I

[61] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, Blue Note Records, 1961.

> fell in love, and I got in trouble [laughter] and, uh, I died this morning of blood poisoning [laughter] outside of General Emergency' … Cause your kid can't talk to you at all … That's what the values be, man. That you can never relate to your mother or father that way."[62]

Bruce revealed that although people were socialized on the negatives of sex, children recognized the contradiction, creating a disadvantage for parents. Just as religious leaders could not relate with laypeople, parents who treated sex as shameful made it difficult for children to approach them with questions of their curiosity or temptations of sex because parents portrayed themselves as asexual and above such desires.

This portrayal of sex as negative and those who practiced it as sinful and dirty inadvertently seemed to elevate other forms of behavior as more "proper." The underground rejected this double standard because in it other immoral acts, like violence, suddenly moved up the hierarchy of appropriate behavior. While Americans denounced both sex and violence as detrimental to children, their daily actions indicated that they believed violence was less shameful.

> "Now the daughter that you love, yeah, … because she's a tramp, because she's got life in her belly and she ain't got a hoop on her finger that some witch doctor blessed – that's how you love that daughter … When I hear that cat saying,
> 'Ah, that tramp! My wife's a tramp, and I got custody of my kids.'
> 'Your wife's a tramp? Whaddaya mean …'
> 'You know what kinda tramp I mean.'
> 'No I don't man, I dunno what kinda tramp you mean at all?'
> 'She goes to bed with guys.'
> 'Well that's certainly a very Christian act. I can't think of anything nicer to do for a guy.'
> 'Yeah, but she does it in front of the kids.'
> Well, I am not that well adjusted yet, but you know, man, I would rather your kids see that than you yelling at your old lady or whacking her out. In fact, I guess it really is no deterrent to his growth to see that, no."[63]

By asking the audience whether sex or violence was more damaging for children's eyes, Bruce effectively illustrated the double standard of mainstream America. Sex, the crucial act for creating a family, was actively avoided in conversation and treated as nonexistent. Parents engaged in it only in the night, and always quietly. Married couples on television

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, 41.

slept in twin beds, implying difficult maneuvering to have sex; and yet, violence was reported on the daily news, and seen in abusive homes. The underground culture rejected the reasoning that sex was shameful and therefore punishable if performed outside specified instances, particularly when violence was a part of daily life.

The Beats included homosexuality in their interpretation of a more progressive definition of sex, refusing to accept sex as appropriate only for heterosexual couples. According to Oliver Harris, mainstream Americans viewed male homosexuality as "the very image of subversion from within: corrupt and corrupting drives that could not be controlled, only hidden."[64] With no reproductive goals, homosexuality prevented men from "growing up" and having families and was performed merely for "pleasure." The Beats challenged this logic by actively engaging in homosocial and homosexual activities, and became notorious for providing havens for all homosexuals, including "weekend homosexuals," who were straight during the week.[65] The Beats, Ginsberg in particular, argued that a paradox existed because homosexuality was both condemned and medicalized. As an indictable crime, homosexuality was a moral issue, but as a medical problem, homosexuality "undermined any notion of absolute moral authority" because it was treatable with therapy, not punishment.[66] Ginsberg's writings "turn[ed] the ideological screw by making the pervert less a social victim or political malcontent … than an authentic upholder of America's historical project" of individual liberty.[67] Beat writer, Jack Kerouac also promoted revision of homosexuality's status by nurturing a

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[64] Oliver Harris, *Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel*, 223.
[65] Clinton Starr, *"I Want to Be with My Own Kind:" Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 46-47.
[66] Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, 71.
[67] Oliver Harris, *Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel*, 229.

homosocial bond with his friend Neal Cassidy which had intense homoerotic undertones.[68] Bruce too questioned the classifications of homosexuality, arguing it was a natural act, albeit typically performed when women were unavailable.

> "[M]en are animals … [G]uys will make it with mud, dogs, cats, goats – ask any guy who has been unfortunate enough to spend time in an institution, or a place where men are deprived of women. Many of these men will practice homosexuality, never to return to it upon release. Ironically, the way homosexuals are punished in this country is by throwing them into jail with other men."[69]

Bruce found such fears of homosexuality irrational and completely useless because Americans were incapable of eradicating homosexuality. Instead of adapting cultural norms to fit the new reality, judges, for example, were expected to uphold the outdated perception of homosexuals. In one bit, Bruce mentioned a judge in Miami who "sentenced two faggots for kissing and dancing."[70] The judge represented mainstream America's fickle attitudes of supposedly wrong behavior.

> "The judge said, *quote* 'I realize this is a medical problem, but I have to establish a precedent at the beginning of the season.' [laughter] … You can kiss all the patsies you want in July, but don't fuss in February."[71]

What Bruce mocked, and the audience apparently recognized as well, was Americans' inconsistent attitude towards homosexuality. Bruce exaggerated the apparent seasonal tendencies of Americans for punishing homosexuals, demonstrating that most Americans were not as offended as they claimed. If homosexuality was truly a deviant and dangerous practice then, like murder, it would be punished, no matter what the month was.

This type of rebellion was new for both Bruce's audiences and straight America. While hipsters actively provoked mainstream ire by engaging in illegal activities, and the

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[68] Ibid, 233.
[69] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 105.
[70] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert.*
[71] Ibid.

Beats denounced mainstream values in their writings, Bruce ridiculed through standup comedy, a venue that was traditionally not antagonistic to its audience. He provided an opportunity to laugh at mainstream follies without necessarily requiring a person to do anything about it. He created the same relationship with his underground audiences found between mainstream America and traditional comedians like Milton Berle. He articulated the logic of these alternative lifestyles by analyzing both cultures' values and demonstrating through his bits the superiority and honesty of underground logic, enabling his audiences to also see the comparison and laugh at the absurdity of the mainstream. Although most comedians used similar devices of ridicule, historically it had been directed at minority groups, as when the Irish were mocked for their constant drinking in the late nineteenth century. Bruce uniquely placed mainstream America in the spotlight, incorporating issues that it considered serious, or simply unfunny, and provided his underground audiences with evidence that the underground was actually living the good, healthy, morally correct life. For example, Bruce employed the serious issue of school teachers' financial worth and poked fun at the reality that entertainers made more money, implying they were valued more.

> "I feel some guilt of the fact that my salary exceeds twenty-fold school teachers' in states like Oklahoma. They get $3200 a year, which is a disgrace, … Education is the answer to everything. World leadership hinges on education. Take Zsa Zsa Gabor, will get $50,000 a week in Las Vegas and school teachers' *top* salary is $6000 a year. This is really sick to me. That's the kind of sick material that I wish *Time* would've written about. I'm not that much of a moralist. If I were I would be donating my salary to school teachers [laughter] you know? I admit that … I'm a hustler, as long as they give, I'll grab [laughter] But I know that someday there's gonna [be] a tribunal [laughter]. We'll all have to answer, I'm sure of that [laughter]. I'm just waiting for the day. I'm saving some money to give back. [laughter] I know I was stealing. I didn't mean to take it. They gave it to me. [laughter] We'll all have to answer. They'll line us up … all the performers.
> 'Alright, line them up, all the offenders there. State their names and their salaries. The sentences will be then meted out.'
> The first offender – 'What is your name then?'
> 'Frankie Laine.'
> 'How much do you make a week Mr. Laine?'
> 'Ten to twelve thousand dollars a week.'

> 'That's *remarkable*! What do you do to earn between ten and twelve thousand dollars a week?'
> '[Sings] Do spend one – '
> 'Burn his wig. [laughter] Break his legs. Thirty years in jail. [laughter] Get them up here. The next one."[72]

By reminding the audience that education was another fundamental value of mainstream America, Bruce exposed the "sick" logic behind performers' salaries. His underground audiences laughed at his manipulation of mainstream beliefs by exposing mainstream America's admiration of entertainers. They found comfort in the belief that the underground did not value entertainment more than education, and enjoyed his rendition of what would happen if mainstream America realized the distortion, or if the underground were in charge.

The young people who disagreed with the worldview of their elders, "parents, civic leaders, law-enforcement officers and even literary critics," and constituted Bruce's underground audience, provided evidence for Bruce about who enjoyed his comedy.[73] Bruce perfected his conversational style among these audiences and maintained it, eventually conveying the underground's criticisms to middle class America. As he gained mainstream attention, he assumed his audiences would continue to be young people who questioned the status quo. He recognized that he performed different comedy from his contemporaries and assumed that "hip" people appreciated his comedy. However, because his routines were popular, or at least noticed, Bruce assumed that this represented a generational gap. Young people were "really better Christians and more spiritual than that last, perverse generation, because this new generation not only rejected

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[72] Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, vol. 2*. Emphasis added to indicate where Bruce stressed a word.
[73] John Clellon Holmes, *The Philosophy of the Beat Generation*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 229.

but [did not] support freak attractions [freak shows]… [because] that's not their entertainment *schtick*."[74]

As a result, Bruce performed many bits pertaining to child rearing, encouraging parents, particularly of young children, to reevaluate the values they had been taught and raise the next generation differently. He believed his audiences were "hip" and looking for guidance to change their surroundings. Kenneth Tynan argues that "he [was] seldom funny without [the] ulterior motive" of enlightening his audiences of the arbitrary rules enforced within mainstream America.[75] For example, he often mocked segregation by replacing race with some other random trait, like ugliness or age, to demonstrate the capriciousness of who was excluded and why.

> "Since my language is completely lauded with hip idiom, Yiddish idiom ... [that] …[w]ith the exception of, perhaps, that group over forty-five that relates because of business to a younger group, I will lose them [older audience members] … So I started thinking that I am going to make it so people between twenty and forty – that's my audience – then I'll really cook man … I'll cut anybody in that area, yeah [applause]. But now we go to another scene … I'm gonna have the thing where nobody over forty is allowed to come in and see me [laughter]. I'll have a sign up man. You don't have to explain that they're white only [laughter]. Nobody over forty … You can sit in the car and somebody can tell you about it, but you can't come in [laughter]. And they have to have I.D.s! Yeah, an I.D.
> Stern voice: 'How old are you?'
> Nervous voice: 'I'm, uh, [mumbles] thirty-nine.' [laughter]
> Stern voice: 'I'll have to see an I.D.' [laughter]
> Nervous voice: 'We're just gonna have cokes, that's all.' [laughter]
> They'll forge the I.D.s I've been thinking about [it] seriously.[76]

Based on the audience's laughter, Bruce's assessment of who enjoyed and appreciated his comedy was somewhat accurate. Despite the appearance that he wanted to educate all Americans to their ideologies' contradictions, Bruce also seemed complacent about the reality that older people were incapable of truly becoming "hip." The audience apparently welcomed his caricature of forbidding the older generation from attending his

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[74] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 123.
[75] Kenneth Tynan, *Forward*, In *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), vii.
[76] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*.

shows, suggesting that they recognized Bruce's comedy might not appeal to older people. This particular bit was performed at Carnegie Hall, and was most likely heard by a predominantly middle-class audience, illustrating that Americans, or at least young Americans, were "hip" to the contradictions between their actions and professed ideology.

However, Bruce's rising popularity within mainstream America possibly resulted from the mainstream's interest in nonconformity. Although straight Americans participated in the American Dream, they were aware of the artificiality and conformity the underground denounced. The Beats' ideology and writings, and bebop albums became highly demanded and profitable commodities because many within the mainstream were also concerned with the ever increasing conformist mass society they were accused of participating in. Thomas Frank argues that "the failings of capitalism … were materialism, wastefulness, and soul-deadening conformity; sins summoned easily … in the vast suburban exodus" and feared by most Americans, hip or square.[77] As disillusionment spread throughout the United States, the underground cultures became commodified. "During their heyday, from the fall of 1957 until around 1964, the Beat Generation drew much media attention, culminating in a true 'media hysteria.'"[78] Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* introduced mainstream Americans to the bohemian world that "regarded marginal status not as a failing but as an asset."[79] Their search for spirituality and mad living resonated as truth to some Americans and romanticized nomadic life for others, creating cultural heroes that refused to conform. At

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[77] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11.
[78] Jaap van der Bent, Mel van Elteren, and Cornelis A. van Minnen, *Introduction*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, eds. Cornelis A. van Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999), 3.
[79] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 197.

the same time, Beat mania simultaneously had the power to validate "middle class values embodied in the American Dream as Beats were [also] depicted as losers" by those who did not believe their version of rebellion was appropriate or accurate.[80]

Bruce essentially gained notice as a celebrated comedian of the underground Beat enclaves who epitomized all the characteristics of the hipster. As Americans became increasingly infatuated with "Beat" culture, Bruce's unique comedy style quickly propelled him to fame. Bruce was unlike traditional comedians, such as Milton Berle or Bob Hope, who represented "the millionaire chums of presidents, endorsing the products that sponsored their weekly television shows," espousing safe satire like "take my wife please," or mocking the difficulty of cutting one's grass low enough to hit a golf ball. [81] Instead, Bruce developed a dialogue with his audience, taking full advantage of their cynicism and delving into topics considered taboo a decade earlier.

For example, he regularly questioned religion's professed desire to bring salvation to all people because once everyone attained higher morality, "then there's no one gonna lay any bread in that poor box."[82] His humor was astutely in line with the Beats' criticisms of the spiritual emptiness of America in the 1950s, with its drive for material gain and demand for conformity, and the Beats' belief that "beyond the violence, the drugs, the jazz, and all the other 'kicks' … this generation [the Beats] w[ould] find a faith and become consciously … a religious generation."[83] Bruce observed that Americans

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[80] Jaap van der Bent, Mel van Elteren, and Cornelis A. van Minnen, *Introduction*, 7-8.
[81] Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Wayne State University Press, 1997), 72.
[82] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, see also Religions Inc., Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, vol. 1*.
[83] John Clellon Holmes, *The Philosophy of the Beat Generation*, 237.

were so obsessed with materialism, religion deteriorated into a capitalist venture, resulting in the ultimate con, religious institutions.

> "There's more churches and people that work for the church than I think there are courthouses and judges. So actually – what it is – Catholicism is like Howard Johnson, [laughter] and what they have are these franchises [laughter] and they give all these people different franchises in the different countries but they have one government, and when you buy the Howard Johnson franchise you can apply it to the geography – whatever's cool for that area [laughter] and then you, you know, pay the bread to the, uh the main office. And you have to, you know, keep a certain standard. Which is cool. But it is definitely a government by itself. And I think that's what we're doing in Vietnam"[84]

In the quest for achieving "normalcy," Americans reduced religion and spirituality to a purchasable franchise, marketed according to particular target audiences. Fear of communism required Americans portray themselves as patriotic, decent citizens, i.e. religious, family oriented, and capitalist. The mass production of technologies like televisions and refrigerators allowed Americans to enjoy their financial success by acquiring "stuff," and as they began buying materials, spirituality and equality were defined in more superficial ways. For the underground culture this was evident in Jim Crow's declaration of "Separate But Equal," and expressed in Bruce's question "What is your interpretation of 'Thou Shalt Not Kill?' It's not, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill, *But* …"[85]

His success within the underground, combined with the increasing demand within mainstream America for underground products, led Bruce to assume he was a welcomed and refreshing voice of discontent. He approached his rising popularity as a sign that mainstream cultural logic was shifting, and his brand of humor was becoming acceptable and preferred. However, Bruce's origins in the underground prevented him from completely gaining mainstream popularity. His label as a "sick" comic effectively classified him as different from his mainstream contemporaries. To be unlabeled, or

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[84] Lenny Bruce, *The Berkeley Concert*, Bizarre Planet Entertainment, 1969.
[85] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 75.

simply to be a "comedian," suggested all could enjoy one's performance, without any consideration of class, race, ethnicity, or gender. Bruce, however, mirrored the underground, and his image as a hipster intrigued, but also distanced mainstream audiences. He represented the "other" community of the underground, and could be enjoyed, or ignored, simply because his criticisms were not delivered from an authoritative member of mainstream America. As more Americans became familiar with Bruce and his humor, he misinterpreted their interest, assuming more Americans were becoming "hip." He disregarded the reality of the relationship between the comedian and his audience, ignoring the fact that comedians intentionally positioned themselves as somewhat sympathetic with their audiences, or as completely antithetical but inferior. This relationship allowed comedians to ridicule and criticize without being labeled a social critic, because standup would not be standup if the audience felt it was getting lectured and not entertained.[86]

Bruce continuously portrayed himself as an outsider of mainstream America by using hip and Yiddish idiom, creating an image of his comedy as primarily enjoyed by members of the underground or straight Americans temporarily participating because he was a novelty representing the rebellious underground. "The world from which [he] came, an underworld of drugs and potential subversion" was continuously mentioned by review critics and in newspapers announcing his performances to remind mainstream Americans that although indulging themselves in Bruce's nefarious world was exciting, he represented the attitudes and arguments of the antagonistic underground.[87] He was an outsider critiquing mainstream America's value system, attempting to modify cultural

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[86] Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly*, vol. 37 no. 1 (1985): 74.
[87] Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man*, 77.

logic to create more “hip” Americans. Despite finding curious and receptive audiences early in his relationship with mainstream America, a tension quickly emerged on where he fit and what he did.

CHAPTER THREE

LENNY BRUCE AND HIS SICKNESS: MAINSTREAMING THE UNDERGROUND'S HUMOR

As the underground increasingly gained attention from mainstream America, Lenny Bruce began securing shows in straight venues, and as more Americans heard about his comedy, they apparently wanted an introduction and explanation of who he was and what type of comedy he performed. In 1959, the *New York Times* attempted such an introduction when Bruce secured a performance on the popular television show "One Night Stand." Throughout the interview, Bruce provided the reader with underground insights like "we're all hustlers," and "it's a comedian's duty to maintain a level of good taste and this to me is a semantic beartrap."[88] He answered questions in a manner resembling his routines, embellishing his language with hipster jargon, breaking up into confusing rants, essentially speaking in a style akin to jazz. A later article reviewing his "One Night Stand" performance declared "most of his comments on jazz, modern art and other topics were in the tedious idiom of the chin-whisker crowd," relegating Bruce to the status of an outsider because his was humor appreciated by the supposedly rebellious and deviant underground.[89] Both articles reflected mainstream America's ambivalent opinions regarding the underground and although there were many who appreciated Bruce's conversational style, the material he satirized created tension surrounding his mainstream introduction.

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[88] Gilbert Millstein, "Man It's Like Satire," *New York Times*, May 3, 1959, pg. SM28.
[89] John P. Shinley, "T.V. Review: Lenny Bruce, 'Beatnik,' on 'One Night Stand,'" *New York Times*, May 13, 1959, pg. 75.

Bruce delivered his comedy in "nervous shards of hip talk accompanied by a series of impersonations made eerily abstruse" because they were not good impersonations.[90] His routines appeared improvised and he often recreated conversations as they actually occurred. He did not develop smooth routines, practiced diligently and performed with perfection. Rather, he imitated conversation and comedy that was developed spontaneously, like it would be in everyday life. For example, he improvised a routine on leprosy that interrupted his famous "Christ and Moses" bit. He digressed during the routine, providing the audience with a humorous account of Moses' sister and Jewish mother arguing over leprosy. He incorporated the audience's stereotypes of Jewish mothers suggesting that if all Jewish mothers were a particular way, then Moses' mother was as well.

> "Although his [Moses] mother and sister did get leprosy … from *picking it* [Bruce and audience laugh]. That's right don't pick it.
> Mother:' Stop picking, you're gonna get lep – stop.'
> Daughter: 'It itches.'
> Mother: 'Cause it's getting better, but don't pick at it.'
> Daughter: 'I'm picking.'
> Mother: 'You're picking it, you're gonna pick it, you're gonna pick – what're you picking?'
> Daughter: 'I'm pickin,' I'm pickin' …
> And do you know why they got leprosy … *'cause they didn't put paper on the seat!* [Bruce and audience laugh]"[91]

Although this particular bit was not performed on "One Night Stand" it accurately reflects Bruce's comedic style. Readers of both *New York Times* articles were presented with multiple images of Bruce. He was new and different from his contemporaries, delivering comedy that was simultaneously more absurd and more realistic. Although his humor resembled the spontaneity of everyday conversation, incorporating realistic topics to reflect the discussions people would have privately, he also reduced those topics to

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[90] Gilbert Millstein, "Man It's Like Satire."
[91] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, Blue Note Records, 1961. Bruce's laughter implies that these were improvised lines that he also thought were funny. Italics indicate where Bruce stressed words.

more absurd analysis by exaggerating the audience's stereotypes to the point of unrealistic encounters. The stereotypical Jewish mother was overbearing, protective, and bossy, and Bruce's portrayal of Moses' mother matching the same description was new for mainstream Americans because many simply did not associate Moses,' or Jesus,' mother with the same characteristics. This created contradictory images of Bruce and his comedy because he humored his audiences by mocking both the sacrosanct Moses and his family and mainstream audiences' preconceived notions of people who were different.

Bruce's emergence into mainstream popular culture reflected the ongoing debate within mainstream America regarding the underground's popularity and values. It was unclear whether or not the underground's rise in popularity was temporary, destined to return to the Beat enclaves and jazz clubs where it first found participants, or if the underground's values and mores were becoming standardized, creating an overall shift in American culture. Bruce manifested this contradiction by performing standup comedy in an unconventional, and presumably underground, manner. He provoked interest within mainstream America because, unlike other underground figures, Bruce performed in straight venues, making himself more accessible to anyone who wanted to sample the underground. However, he maintained his underground roots, performing the comedy that had endeared him with the underground. This chapter will examine if and how the change in audience affected Bruce's comedy. Examining his routines demonstrates how different he was from traditional comedians, providing clues to explain why he was initially welcomed within mainstream America, but rejected later. Despite his brief flirtation with mainstream popularity, Bruce inverted traditional comedy, focusing his scrutiny on the majority and not the minority. He was unable to establish himself as a

mainstream act precisely because of his perfection of his own style of improvised conversation with the audience. He appears to have sought a balance between the comedy that propelled him to national attention and his new audiences, while maintaining his image of a hipster. Ultimately, his conversational style appeared out of place within mainstream America, and Bruce's appearance of bridging the underground and the mainstream alienated his potential audiences.

Even as he gained mainstream interest, Bruce quickly developed a reputation as a disrespectful comedian insistent on the revision of traditional values. His was a more cynical form of satire, also representative of black humor, which traditionally focused on mocking the incongruities of majority cultural logic. Black humor expressed the underground's disillusionment with the "fulfillment of the American Century" by utilizing irony and fatalism to question and point out America's contradictions.[92] In contrast to "white" humor, which merely poked fun at the "foibles" of American life, but never challenged the "status quo," black humor was "black, perverse, sadistic … [and] … black in its pessimism" about American incongruities.[93] It focused on mocking cultural logic, turning its "merciless attention to sacred and politically sensitive topics," such as war, racism, and Communism, demanding America's hypocrisies be recognized and corrected.[94] Although this type of humor was not a new phenomenon, having existed in literature since at least the nineteenth century, Bruce was one of the first humorists to deploy it against institutions like family and religion. Traditionally, such topics were assumed sacrosanct, and were often left alone in satire. Bruce, however, broadened the

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[92] Joseph Boskin, *"The Giant and the Child:" Cruel Humor in American Studies*, In *The Humor Prism in 20th Century American Culture*, ed. Joseph Boskin (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 190.
[93] Conrad Knickerbocker," Humor With a Mortal Sting," *New York Times*, September 27, 1964, pg. BR3.
[94] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 89.

scope of black humor by including them along with racism and Communism and quickly established himself as a symbol of black humor.

America's emphasis on individualism had made the communal links of family and religion appear less effective and important, which ultimately enabled Bruce to target such institutions in his satire.[95] He relayed the underground's rebukes of the mainstream in a light-hearted and entertaining fashion, and "provid[ed] relief from the pieties of the over-serious liberal conscience" by mocking the outdated standards of normalcy, decency, and equality.[96] However, unlike recognizably black humorists like Terry Southern or Eric Nicol, who discussed serious subjects like war and murder with irony and humor, but maintained a certain amount of tragedy and "good taste," Bruce incorporated blatantly unfunny topics and often reverted to childish antics, making serious matters ridiculous and hysterical. For example, he created a routine reminiscing about his early career when he performed material similar to mainstream comedians, and was praised for being funny but clean.

> "[A]nd, around 1951, the consensus of showbiz opinion was, 'Anybody can get a laugh with dirty toilet jokes; it takes talent to get laughs with clean stuff. You'll go a long way, Lenny, you're funny and clean.'
> Tears filtered through my lashes and rivered along each side of my nose. I was overcome with emotion – for I was blessed with talent; I didn't have to resort to dirty toilet jokes.
> Then I started worrying … how dirty *is* my toilet?
> I lay in bed, thinking about the 'dirty-resort-to-anything-for-a-laugh' comedian. This could be the start of making the word 'resort' dirty. Comedians who work resorts, entertaining people who go to resorts, are certainly resorting.
> I couldn't contain my religious fervor. I exploded from the bedroom, thundered down the hall and threw open the door to that odious place – the 'resort.'
> I screamed, 'You dirty, filthy, stinky, crappy, Commie, dopey toilet! Thank God I don't have to resort to you to make people laugh. It's just a shame that there aren't laws to keep you and your kind out of a decent community. Why don't you go back where you came from? Take the tub and

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[95] Joseph Boskin, *"The Giant and the Child,"* 190. Boskin argues that traditionally American humor developed in response to struggle as a defense mechanism. The post-World War II years were unique because humor developed in response to American hegemony during as extremely prosperous time, revealing the cynicism that Bruce was able to tap into. This development in humor combined with America's heightened emphasis on individual success made historically sacrosanct institutions, like family and church, vulnerable for criticism and satire, which Bruce utilized.
[96] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 89.

> the sink and that jellyfish hamper with you! Even though their names aren't as dirty as yours, anybody who'd live with a toilet must be resort-addicted. Purists don't even go to the toilet. All I can say to you, toilet, is – it's lucky you're white!"[97]

Bruce took Americans' distaste for "toilet" jokes to the extreme by literally interpreting the toilet as an indecent object that needed to be shunned from society. Although he childishly mocked a metaphor, the last line about race transformed the routine into a political statement as well. The insults to his toilet resembled confrontations between African Americans and white supremacists, portraying the immaturity of prejudice as similar to hating one's toilet. He paralleled a typically unfunny toilet with racism, mocking mainstream America's classification of "good taste" and its squeamishness about sensitive topics like racism. Hurling insults at one's toilet reflected white Americans' response to something offensive, and by doing so, Bruce mocked America's euphemism for "toilet humor," which clearly had no reference to a toilet.

This humor diverged from black humor by making seemingly inconsequential but tangentially "dirty" subjects into humorously ironic and serious statements, leading Bruce to be labeled a "sick" comic because he did not limit himself to traditional black humor. Instead, he mocked everything around him, no matter how sacred, controversial, or trivial. This characterization encapsulated many different meanings and which one prevailed for any given audience probably depended on one's perception of Bruce's comedy. For those who enjoyed his comedy, Bruce's "sick" label represented mainstream America's recognition of discontent with the constructed conformity of America's success, whether or not Bruce was right. He also represented the alternative lifestyles of the underground, and although the underground also had contradictions, Bruce validated the underground

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[97] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), 43. Ellipses in original.

sensibility by analyzing American values in such an entertaining fashion. However, those who did not appreciate Bruce's lampoons, or so many others' enjoyment of him, used the label as a "strateg[y] of containment" in order to dismiss or ignore his criticisms.[98] The categorization ensured immediate recognition of Bruce's nontraditional methods, dismissing him as inappropriate and unimportant. Achieving the label "sick" meant one was willing to discuss topics not normally referred to in polite society, especially with blunt, "crude," and yet well known language as reminding people that "dykes … [were] idiomatic for lesbians."[99] Bruce quickly became the archetype for "sick" humor, prompting comparisons with other comedians like Bob Newhart, Joey Bishop, or Phil Ford and Mimi Hines on a spectrum of how "sick" or "well" they were.[100]

"Well" comedians traditionally mocked those not present in the audience or innocent behavior like what one's wife made for dinner and how it burned.[101] Their comedy provided an opportunity for audience members to enjoy brief interludes of escape and relaxation with no intention of making them contemplate the deeper meanings of the comedian's rhetoric. When performing for underground audiences, Bruce resembled a "well" comedian, providing relaxation and amusement at the mainstream's expense, but upon gaining mainstream popularity, his humor became black and "sick"

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[98] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 5.
[99] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*.
[100] See Gilbert Millstein, "New Sick and/or Well Comic," *New York* Times, August 7, 1962, pg. SM22; "Portrait of a Well, Well, Well Comic," *New York* Times, January 1, 1961, pg. SM12. See also, Larry Wolters, "On the Covers – ," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 27, 1960, pg. C7. Wolters did not use the term "sick" humor. Instead, he seemed appreciative of Bruce's humor because he reviewed Ford and Hines, saying "In these days of … sophisticated comedians, most funsters aspire to sophisticated comedy. But not Mimi and Phil." He was not critiquing them for this, simply pointing out how unusual it was at this time because of comedians like Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Shelley Berman.
[101] See Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* vol. 37 no. 1 (1985): 71-80. Mintz argues that all comedians provide some form of community for the audience, and even well, or traditional comedians' complaints "contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be." (77). Pertaining to one's wife burning dinner, the idea that all women were expected to be excellent cooks overlooked the reality that many were not.

because he mocked the audience, not those outside. Moreover, Bruce did not focus on innocent or insignificant behavior. Instead, he mocked habitual and daily behavior that most Americans did not acknowledge existed, which resulted in him blending the categories of comedian and critic. Many white people, for example, who preferred to view themselves as liberal and friendly to African Americans nevertheless viewed African Americans through stereotypes. Bruce drew attention to this tendency, exposing the complacent attitudes towards race most Americans shared, but refused to admit.

> "This is the typical white person's concept of how we relax colored people at parties.
> Bruce: 'Yeah, it's a hell of a spread. They really know how – … I didn't get your name, uh –'
> Miller: 'Miller.'
> Bruce: 'Miller, my name's Anderson … I never saw you around this neighborhood. You live around here?'
> Miller: 'Yeah, on the other side.'
> Bruce: 'Oh, I was wondering about that, uh [pause] That Joe Lewis is a hell of a fighter! [laughter]
> Miller: 'Yeah, yeah he is.'
> Bruce: 'Hey, you got a cigarette on ya? … Uh, oh the one you're smoking? [laughter] Alright, I'll put that out for you, yeah [laughter] You know, uh, I don't know these people too well. You familiar with them? … I don't know, if they're uh – I think they're hebes – You're not Jewish are you? [laughter] No offense, some of my best friends are Jews. [laughter] We have 'em over to the house for dinner. They're alright, you know some Sheenies are no good [laughter] but, uh, you seem like a white Jew to me. [laugher] Yeah, that Bo Jangles, Christ can he tap dance! [laughter] … You tap dance yourself?' [laugher]
> Miller: 'Yeah, yeah.'
> Bruce: 'All you people can tap dance. [laugher] You people have a natural sense of rhythm. What's that born in you I guess. [laughter] Yeah boy, the way I figure it, is uh, no matter what the hell a guy is [pause] if he stays in his place, he's alright. [laughter] That's the way I look at it. That's what's causin all the trouble in the world. Everybody like, uh – I mean, uh – Well, here's to Joe Lewis [clink glasses together] Joe Lewis was a guy who – The way I figure it, he was a guy who just knew when to get in there and get outta there. That's more then I can say for a lotta you niggers. [laughter] Look I had a few before, on the way over here. You're alright, you're a good boy. Uh, did you have anything to eat yet?'
> Miller: 'No I haven't I – '
> Bruce: 'Uh, I don't know if there's any watermelon left. [laughter] Uh, fried chicken or … but uh, we'll see if we can fix ya up with something [laughter] uh I wanna have you over to the house, but I got a bit of a problem – and I don't want you to think I'm outta line, but [pause] I gotta sister. [laughter] And I hear that you guys – [laughter] You know it's my sister. Well I'll put it to you a different way. You wouldn't want no Jew doing it to your sister, would you? [laughter] That's the way I feel, you know. [laughter] I don't want no coon doin it to my sister. [laughter] No offense, you know what I mean?'
> Miller: 'Sure, sure –'
> Bruce: 'But as far as my sister's concerned, shake hands. You don't do it to her?'"[102]

[102] Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, volume Two*, Fantasy Records, 1960. Eric Miller was an African American guitarist who frequently performed routines with Bruce, especially regarding race.

Bruce exposed the uncomfortable reality that racism still existed, and for audience members who were aware of this, his impersonation of an extremely uncouth person was hilarious. However, for audience members who truly believed African American men were a threat to white women, this bit, combined with the audience's laughter, could appear mean-spirited and insulting. Bruce encouraged his audience's examination of their own behavior for examples of prejudice, and his "hip" audiences were able to laugh at themselves or assume they were not the white people he mocked, but for audience members who believed "racism" no longer existed, Bruce's inducement of laughter at a barrage of unintentionally racist comments could be uncomfortable because they were now the butt of the joke.

By incorporating such traditionally serious and ignored topics into his comedy, Bruce piqued his potential audiences' interest with his renditions of their behavior. However, sympathy with his viewpoint was not a prerequisite for enjoying him because he was seen as both an entertainer and an outsider. This created a dual image of him as someone looking in at the mainstream from the outside, and as an entertainer making money by ridiculing what he saw. As a hipster, Bruce "was an affront to suburbia on behalf of hip urbanites and suburbanites alike," but as an underground figure he appeared to reject mainstream values, and therefore, had no legitimate connection with the world he criticized.[103] Bruce sought to dispel this image arguing, through his comedy, that the distinctions between hip and square Americans polarized them, creating animosity where none existed.

> "Now, of what entertains. Then going back to what I said of uh – How much exposure you've had, doesn't make you hip or square, or highly intellectual or lacking intellectual capacity if you don't

[103] John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 2.

> understand a joke, because if you haven't been exposed to it – Okay, I'll show a classic example. A joke, *funny* joke. Alright, Kennedy cannot make the acceptance speech. He's got a virus and they got about a half hour to go and they're flipping out, alright. I know a guy in Boston who's a ringer for him. 'Well get him here, right away.'
> 'He's a burlesque comic, he's worked real toilets.' [laughter]
> 'Yeah? Alright, get him anyway. Dress him up – ' [laughter]
> Now the guy is frightening. He's a real ringer. 'Does he drink?'
> 'No, it's a little speech. He'll memorize it and that's all.' [laughter] … 'We'll kill him man, right after the show.' [laughter] … So they got six real heavyweights holding their breath.
> 'Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States.'
> 'Thank you ambassador. Before I introduce my cabinet members, I'd like to uh – I'd like to give you my impression of Clyde McCoy' [imitates horn sounds] [laughter]
> That's funny right? Now, only funny if you have been exposed to that many toilet comics."[104]

Believing and participating in the American Dream did not differentiate the lifestyles of mainstream and underground. Rather, one's exposure to and perception of the hypocrisies latent within the American Dream determined one's "hipness," and thus enjoyment of Bruce's comedy. A "hip" individual, regardless of being a white collar worker or a beatnik, recognized the Dream's contradictions. A square, however, "spen[t] all the juices and energies of life in stultifying submission to the 'rat race'" and ignored the realities of who could and could not participate.[105] Bruce attempted to merge the two lifestyles by demonstrating they agreed with one another in many aspects, the "hip" were simply more aware and honest in their appraisal.

For example, Bruce mocked Americans' tendency to create euphemisms to avoid discussing sex. He observed that, when examined critically, most Americans straight and hip could agree that euphemisms were immature and ridiculous. Bruce argued that sexual words should not be considered indecent because they described an action most Americans performed, but most Americans preferred submerging the topic in nonsexual language in order to avoid appearing crass in polite conversation. Bruce's bit, "To Come," broke those words down to their grammatical definitions, implying their sexual

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[104] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*.
[105] Paul O'Neil, *The Only Rebellion Around*, In *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 426.

meaning through drum beats that picked up tempo, demonstrating that mainstream and underground Americans could agree that neither words were offensive without the double meaning of "ejaculation."

> [Bell rings] "Tooooooo is a preposition. [Bell rings] To is a preposition [drum beat]. *Come* is a verb. [Chanting with bell and drum beats] To is a preposition, come is a verb – the verb intransitive. To come, to come. I've heard these two words my whole adult life, and as a kid when I thought I was sleeping. [Sing-song voice] To come, to come. It's been like a big drum solo. Did ya come [drum beat]? Did ya come? Good [laughter]. Did ya come good? [Speeds up to bebop tempo] Did ya come good; did ya come good; did ya come good …"[106]

Bruce observed that only when new definitions were applied, creating a double entendre, were "to" and "come" offensive or sexual, and his childish inclusion of the drum beats reflected Americans' immature handling of sex. Instead of discussing sex like any other topic, Americans reverted to child-like language, labeling body parts with nonsense words like "ga-ga."[107] Bruce augmented this immaturity by sexualizing grammar, and he induced laughter at the audience's normally embarrassed reaction to those words' use in a sexual connotation. The audience created the offense in the words by anointing them with sexual meanings. Bruce's routine reflected the underground's direct approach to sex by treating it as adults, with frank language, and he gently chided his audiences to grow up while making them laugh at their own embarrassment.

It was precisely this ability to "see" the humor inherent in American social niceties and his dissection of them that both intrigued and shocked Bruce's potential audiences. As he gained attention within mainstream America, his ability to secure multiple shows and sell tickets, in some instances for "hold-out" crowds, suggests that many Americans initially considered him funny, or were at least interested in his

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[106] Lenny Bruce, *To Is a Preposition; Come is a Verb*, Knitting Factory, 2000.
[107] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, ed. John Cohen (London: MacMillan, 1972), 42.

humor.[108] However, Bruce seems to have assumed his emergence into mainstream popular culture reflected Americans' agreement with him. He ignored the possibility that many Americans acted as "'slumming voyeurs'" eagerly sampling the forbidden culture of the underground while not immersing themselves permanently.[109] His status as an outsider made it unlikely that he could stimulate a shift in values; and despite the validity of his argument that "God-damn you doesn't mean God-damn *you* anymore," most Americans did not necessarily consider him an authentic expert on proper and moral behavior.[110] He was, after all, a hipster mocking institutions that many Americans believed defined and aided them in their success. He represented an anomaly for most Americans because unlike other underground figures, like the Beats, who supposedly sought separation from the mainstream, Bruce bridged the two worlds. His actions suggested that he believed the mainstream needed education, and he portrayed himself as superior in logic and values because he associated with the underground. Unfortunately, "the herd-like patriotic unities demanded by the Second World War and the Cold War aftermath effectively suppressed [Americans'] traditional toleration for jesting," particularly when presented as criticism from the underground.[111]

Bruce often criticized mainstream America's attachment to religion, arguing most did not follow their purported beliefs. He did this by mocking aspects generally deemed too controversial for conversation, even within the serious circles of academia and religious leadership. He never blatantly promoted any form of religion, such as the

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[108] Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticket," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 10, 1959, pg. A2.
[109] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 9.
[110] Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*. Emphasis added to reflect Bruce's stress on a word.
[111] Arthur Power Dudden, *The Record of Political Humor*, In *American Humor*, ed. Arthur Power Dudden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 64.

Beats' version of Buddhism, but he depicted mainstream institutionalized religion as inferior because Americans selectively interpreted the tenets, such as tolerance, to fit their wants, while the underground supposedly upheld and authentically practiced religion's principles. Anti-Semitism, for example, was a well known practice within the U.S., but most Americans claimed it no longer existed, especially in light of America's quick recognition of Israel in 1947. However, just as with African Americans, most white Americans continued interacting with Jews based on stereotypes, which Bruce argued resulted from the death of Jesus two thousand years prior.

> "Now, a Jew, in the dictionary, is one who is descended from the ancient tribes of Judea, or one who is regarded as descended from that tribe. That's what it says in the dictionary; but you and I know what a Jew is – *One Who Killed Our Lord*. I don't know if we got much press on that in Illinois – we did this about two thousand years ago – two thousand years of Polack kids whacking the shit out of us coming home from school. Dear, dear. And although there should be a statue of limitations for that crime, it seems that those who neither have the actions nor the gait of Christians, pagan or not, will bust us out, unrelenting dues, for another deuce.
> And I really searched it out, why we pay the dues. Why do you keep breaking our balls for this crime?
> 'Why, Jew, because you skirt the issue. You blame it on Roman soldiers.'
> Alright, I'll clear the air once and for all, and confess. Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in my basement. It said: 'We killed him. Signed, Morty.'
> And a lot of people say to me, 'Why did you kill Christ?'
> 'I dunno [pause] it was one of those parties, got out of hand, you know.'
> We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him."[112]

This bit was probably well received by underground audiences where the Beats would have likely questioned Christianity's claim to have mended its relationship with Judaism. However, those within the mainstream were not accustomed to satirical anti-Semitism, at least not Bruce's version. He did not make jokes at the expense of Jews, but rather Americans' anti-Semitic tendencies, which they claimed no longer existed. In addition to blurring the boundary between serious commentary and entertainment by incorporating anti-Semitism and not anti-Semitic comedy, Bruce portrayed it as a problem within the

[112] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, 51-52.

mainstream. He amused his audiences with the ignorance of stereotypes, which he implied the underground did not find amusing in the traditional sense.

This humor complicated Bruce's image, and consequently his acceptance, within mainstream America. He celebrated his background as a hipster, tailoring his comedy to underground preferences, and created an image of himself as enjoyable for those "hip" to the underground's sensibilities. Standup comedy historically "lambaste[ed] the bourgeois interests" of elites and intellectuals, appealing primarily to working class Americans.[113] However, those who were supposedly ridiculed could also enjoy standup because they were capable of laughing at themselves, or understood the comedy as entertainment and not necessarily serious criticism. Bruce assumed his primary audiences were somewhat educated and "hip" to America's hypocrisies, and unlike traditional comedians, he inverted his humor and focused his scrutiny on the ambivalence of average Americans and their stereotypes. Elites and intellectuals recognized that despite his lack of participation in the institutions he ridiculed he understood them, having been raised with the expectation of upholding them.[114] Average Americans, however, typically believed institutions, like religion and family, were not appropriate for satire. Although the definition of obscenity was not necessarily viewed as sacrosanct, many Americans did not perceive it as subject to interpretation.

In addition, Bruce differentiated himself from traditional comedians by portraying himself as superior to his mainstream audiences. He acted as though he logically followed American ideology and mainstream America did not. Comedians generally

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[113] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 92.

[114] Albert Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!* (New York: Random House, 1971), 88. Goldman recounts how Bruce was raised in a strict home, where all his relatives "were great believers in 'the rules.' You were supposed to 'police' your 'quarters,' and do well in school every day, and be a perfect host when guests arrived in the house." (88).

portrayed themselves as inferior to their audiences, but Bruce argued against his mainstream audiences' beliefs, creating resentment among many within mainstream America.[115] His first major arrest in 1961, for example, pitted Bruce against a police officer named James Solden who was apparently not an avid fan. Solden claimed Bruce's use of the word "cocksucker" during his performance was illegal because he intended to offend the audience. During the arrest, Bruce asked Solden whether or not the word "clap" was offensive, attempting to prove that it, just like "cocksucker," had no real meaning until someone applied one. Solden claimed it was a better word than "cocksucker," to which Bruce responded, "not if you get the clap from a cocksucker."[116] Bruce displayed his annoyance with mainstream culture and appeared to be humorously lecturing Solden on the error of obscenity laws. Solden was not a fan of Bruce, possibly because he disagreed with his satire of American values, and appeared insulted at Bruce's insinuation that he was superior in logic as is demonstrated by his immediate arrest. Bruce did not validate mainstream values, which is what most Americans expected to find in comedy. Instead, he inverted his comedy, making his own underground values and logic superior to mainstream culture. This required mainstream America's acceptance of being challenged and burlesqued from the outside.

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[115] See Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly*, vol. 37 no. 1 (1985): 71-80. Mintz argues that comedians often portray themselves as failures of their audiences' standards and values. For example, Bob Hope often portrayed himself as greedy, but unable to ever succeed in acquiring wealth through get-rich-schemes. This image was antithetical to American values of achieving the American Dream with hard work and delayed gratification, and Hope's constant failures helped prove to his audiences that their way was better. Bruce did not portray himself as a failure because of inadequacy. Rather, his inability to meet mainstream standards resulted from the mainstream's distortion of their own values.

[116] Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Media Fusion, 2002), 51.

This inversion resulted from his commentary on "invisible," or ignored, behavior overlooked because it was "normal."[117] Through observations on the daily actions most Americans assumed natural and ahistorical, Bruce attacked "sacred" institutions and beliefs. His performances hinted at the possibility that Americans were modifying their opinions about appropriate satire, allowing traditionally sacrosanct topics to become fair game. Although he was not the first example "provid[ing] strong evidence of weakening Victorian mores," his originality emerged from his desire to perform for as many people as possible.[118] He brought his satirical commentary to mainstream popular culture, introducing an alternate evaluation of "normal" practices, which raises the question of why Americans found him funny. Elites, intellectuals, and average "hip" Americans could appreciate his monologues as satire and enjoyed his ability to jest about serious topics as they would among themselves. Unfortunately, those "who were just too damn dumb" to understand Bruce's methods, or appreciate the possibility that within private spheres many might agree with him, were offended by his portrayal of their values as relative, inconsistent, and funny. [119]

For example, Bruce argued that Americans' narrow definition and obsessive judgment of beauty created an unhealthy repulsion from objects or actions deemed disgusting or out of the ordinary. The characteristics had become naturalized and standardized to the point where many Americans forgot that certain aspects of beauty

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[117] Stephanie Koziski, *The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic*, In *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America*, ed. Joseph Boskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 87.
[118] Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), 180. This quote references dance's popularity in the early twentieth century, but it pertains to Bruce. He was another example of this weakening that had been in the works for decades. See also Goldman, *Ladies and Gentlemen – Lenny Bruce!*, 96. After being discharged from the navy, Bruce's father encouraged him to go to school so they could start a business together, but Bruce "had his heart set on the glamour of the stage." He wanted fame and fortune, which required mainstream acceptance.
[119] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 92.

were completely artificial. Rather than recognize such characteristics as culturally determined, however, most Americans believed beauty was universally defined by some natural, essential quality, making people who did not, or could not, meet such standards an affront to decency.

> "You have, from motion picture, been brainwashed to accept certain forms of beauty … A certain face you'll buy. And any chick who comes out with an ear growing outta here [gestures to face] you're not gonna tell me she's beautiful. Interesting face, yeah [laughter]. But as far as being horny lookin,' forget it man [laughter]. No. A conversation piece, uh, you can do jokes with her … But as far as really being – So I figure, what could you do to get a good composite? What is beauty to you? To build a girl, a chick that would come out, the most jaded … guild for the *New York Times* [laughter] … And they've seen everything, man … A chick comes out that makes you all go 'Look at that!' What could you – gown, they've done; hairstyle, they've done; voice, they've done [pause] What kind of a chick? … What would I do that would really make you all look up? Chick comes out and a gimmick. [Whispers] Hair under her arms [laughter]. Think about it, *hair* under her arms, man [laughter]. But you don't give it away right away [laughter]. No, does a couple of ballads … and they're eating … all of a sudden [laughter],
> '*Freddie*! … Did you see – '
> 'See what?'
> 'Uh, [laughter] I don't know, uh [laughter]. The lights I think in here.'
> Oh no, now she's really got this guy pinned [laughter] … He's really lookin' now, right [laughter]. But now he's waiting for the flash again – but no, she's covers it, does some ballads and walks [laughter] … Now they come back *every* night. She does it once or twice a week … '*There it is!*' [laughter] … That chick's got *hair* under her arms!' [laughter]
> 'Ah you're outta your mind, man. That's *disgusting* [laughter]. Terrible taste.'
> 'Well I thought that the first time I thought I saw it [laughter]. And I went home and I just, uh – I've been back here six times this week, man [laughter]. You don't know what a release it was to see her *do* that, man [laughter]. I just never thought she'd do it again, man [laughter]. But she's really got a *bush* under there, man I tell ya.' [laughter]
> Now when I first went home I said – I can't believe that a contemporary woman – I mean it's *disgusting*, it's horrendous taste. But then I started to think [pause] Is it in bad taste from a theological concept? Is it blasphemous? [laughter] Is it against God, no [laughter]. Is it hygiene? Certainly not [laughter]. No it doesn't relate to hygiene at all. If it related to hygiene, then you would have to be consistent and shave the eyebrows, the head, the *schmusky*, the whole bit [laughter]. So it does not relate to hygiene *at all*."[120]

Instead of mocking those who were ugly, and thus inferior to the audience and inadequate by their standards, Bruce mocked the audience's artificial standards of beauty. A woman who met every standard of beauty, but did not shave her underarms was considered disgusting, unattractive, and somewhat offensive. By questioning the rationale behind this standard, Bruce confronted the audience with their own arbitrary judgments and contradictory impulses. He did not necessarily critique elitist standards because such

[120] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*. Emphasis added to show where Bruce stressed a word.

standards were held by a majority of Americans, and it was educated people who acknowledged culture's defining influence on common practices. Rather, Bruce mocked those who assumed such categories, definitions, and socialized norms were permanent, ahistorical truths and not "the product[s] of a specific historical moment," namely the mid-twentieth century's marketplace advertising that portrayed attractive people as happiest and most successful.[121]

Despite ridiculing average Americans, Bruce sought ways to assure them he was not mean-spirited in his criticisms. He continued mocking middle-class America, religion, and the government to his larger audiences, but in some ways he altered his act, appearing less critical and more traditionally entertaining. Comparing Bruce's various albums released during his career illustrates the shift in his humor, and thus, his relationship with his audiences. *The Lenny Bruce Originals, volumes, One* and *Two*; and *To Is a Preposition; Come Is a Verb* were various bits performed at different shows, primarily during his early career when he performed at small venues for small crowds, most likely from the underground. *The Carnegie Hall Concert* and *The Berkeley Concert* were performed and released for a mainstream audience in 1961 and 1969, and both were uninterrupted shows.[122] Whereas the small venues provided him with opportunities to play off the audiences' response, tailoring his act spontaneously to get the most laughs, at Berkeley and Carnegie Hall, Bruce was unable to create such an intimate setting. It is probable that he maintained his spontaneous revision of his routines in response to the

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[121] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 8.

[122] The Berkeley Concert was most likely performed between 1964 and 1966 and released after Bruce's death. He performed for a new generation more receptive to his criticisms so he appears to have returned to his earlier comedian-audience relationship. However, because he performed in a large venue, the intimacy established in the mid 1950s could not be created again, leaving him with the image of an entertainer, representative of the discontent of the 1950s.

audience's reaction, but most likely he did so by including disclaimers. He prefaced his criticisms with assertions that reminded his audiences he was an American and loved capitalism before denouncing American policies and values.

> "Communism, okay. I don't dig Communism because uh – well first I'll tell you what – capitalism is the best. It's free enterprise, alright. Barter. Gimbles. If I can really rank with the clerk. 'Well I don't like this, uh' I can resolve it if it really gets ridiculous. I go 'Frig it man. I walk.' What can this guy do at Gimbles? Even if I was the president, this guy at Gimbles, he can always reject me from that store. But I can always go to Macy's. He can't really hurt me. Communism is like one big phone company. [laughter] Government controlled man. And if I get too rank with that phone company – where can I go? [laughter] … Capital system, the best system. Yeah. But – I'm not gonna buy any time from Radio Free Europe. [laughter] Frig that … 'How bad do you hate communism? Why don't you send us some money.' [laughter] Cause I have nothing to tell Europe at all. [laughter] All I can tell Europe is that uh, this is my country and I dig it. It's good to me. There's no right or wrong. I don't give a shit about [communism] … I'm not going to moralize with you. If communism cooks for you, solid man. But I'm not gonna try to free anybody. Not when the governor of Georgia closed the schools [to prevent integration]."[123]

This ensured the audience that, despite the flaws he found with the United States, Bruce still recognized the validity of some of its key tenets. In addition, his send-up of communism and segregation in familiar capitalist terms allowed the audience to view him as an outsider trying to fit in because he understood their values enough to make accurate comparisons with the phone company. Such spontaneous revision gave the audience time to brace itself for offense, but also relegated Bruce's rant to the traditional entertainment status of inferiority and not a critical one.

For example, at Carnegie Hall, he performed for a presumably middle-class crowd, and while denouncing racism, he also portrayed segregation with multiple interpretations, allowing for mixed messages. He argued for the relativity of morals which changed constantly depending on the society, but also downplayed America's flaws because it had progressed further than previous societies. He demonstrated this with the following bit comparing contemporary America with Rome, denouncing the *a priori* belief that African Americans were inferior and dangerous.

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[123] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*.

> "When you get to morals, it's just *your* morals. And they're not even morals, they're mores. 'Cause we got, uh, the Romans, right. We're all Romans and we're all correct. We gotta good government. We have a, uh, you know, our whole judicial system is really great, and … We've got beautiful people. Now there's one group in this Roman society that is correct. Now this group is against everything that is good. This group are called Christians. Now what do we do with the Christians? There's only one thing that is correct and moral to do. Throw them to the lions. That was as rough as segregation gets, boy. Lion fressing, yeah [laughter]. I'd rather get schlepped away from a lunch counter *any day*, yeah [laughter]. There's a definite quantitative difference between, you know, being refused the right to service and [being] served as refuse, you know [laughter and applause] … Christians, they paid heavy dues."[124]

Despite his reminder that Christians were originally a minority group and viewed as subversive, Bruce's comparison of feeding them to the lions and denying African Americans service in restaurants created alternate images. Americans segregated African Americans, but their system was not as cruel as the Romans,' which may have reassured some audience members. Bruce recognized that he performed for a largely white audience that may not agree with segregation, but were likely to be complacent about its existence. This awareness of who the audience was led Bruce to continuously ridicule segregation, but simultaneously ease the audience's guilt by portraying it as either the older generation's institution, or at least not as bad as past systems.

Bruce, therefore, appeared to respect some American values, at least in theory, despite mocking mainstream America, because he did so in a less confrontational manner than hipsters and Beats. Although his humor mirrored the underground's sensibilities, his status as a comedian, and disclaimers, made him appear harmless. In another instance during his Carnegie Hall performance, Bruce warned the audience, "I'm really gonna get you depressed now for a minute, but I'll cook out of it. But I really want to lay it home hard here."[125] He then went on and performed his Dear Abby bit, questioning parents' omission of sex from their children's lives. By warning the audience that he was about to perform a depressing bit, Bruce illustrated his own recognition that different audiences

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[124] Ibid. Emphasis added to indicate where Bruce stressed a word.
[125] Ibid.

responded to him differently. He acknowledged that his Dear Abby bit, although widely popular with underground audiences, might offend or shock Carnegie Hall. His warnings enabled the audience to laugh at the bit without seriously contemplating what he said. Bruce continued creating a conversation with his audiences, but he took the edge off by acknowledging that they may not completely agree with him. He simply pointed out a common hypocrisy the underground found amusing and he did so as an entertainer, not an entertaining cultural critic.

This subtle shift in his humor altered his relationship with the audience, and in doing so, Bruce was forced to acknowledge his status as an outsider. At Carnegie Hall, he was solely there to entertain, representing the underground and its discontent with mainstream America. Like African Americans entering into minstrelsy, Bruce was expected to perform material that "contain[ed] elements of disrespect, and even opposition to [mainstream] structures of authority," but also provide his audience with "'explanations' … for the maintenance of respect for those structures of authority."[126] He could not interact with the audience as he had with the underground, creating an atmosphere of intimacy as if he were hanging out with the crowd. A division was immediately established and Bruce symbolized the "other" community of the underground, leveling the underground's criticisms, but also validating the mainstream's discomfort with the underground.

Bruce ultimately created a dilemma for himself by maintaining his underground humor, tailored slightly for the mainstream. He provided critical analysis of American values, but through the mainstream venue of standup comedy. He was a "triumph[ant] … hipster," gaining popularity by assimilating intellectual humor into his childish and

[126] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 3.

immature comedy.[127] For those who did not "cook" with him it was unclear whether he was trying to convert them or simply entertaining them. As his popularity and recognition broadened outside the "relatively secure isolation of the campus, in the learned journals read by mere handfuls, or in the elite theaters and small art-movie houses," Bruce's comedy began hitting a nerve with some, inciting a demand that he be controlled.[128] However, pointing out any particular group who felt threatened by Bruce's comedy is difficult. No group of people vocally protested him or his performances, and the government seemed unconcerned with him until 1961, and his first major arrest which resulted from his use of the word "cocksucker." Afterward, the tangible evidence of his arrest for saying "cocksucker" demonstrated that Bruce had "offended" a community and encouraged police officers and district attorneys in other communities to begin actively pursuing legal means to coerce Bruce to either conform to standards of decency or stop performing altogether, although many who claimed offense later revealed their unfamiliarity with his comedy. His connection to the Beats and the underground world of jazz might have played a role in the government's efforts to limit his ability to perform. His critics rarely got beyond simple charges of obscenity, but his association with the underground challenged other mainstream standards of behavior in many ways.

As mentioned earlier, the Beats were notorious for promoting friendlier relations between blacks and whites. Bebop jazz brought small groups of "racially enlightened" people together because "it flaunted its divergence from the fundamental conventions of

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[127] Ibid, 91.
[128] Frank Kofsky, *Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist* (New York: Pathfinder Press, inc., 1974), 23-24.

popular music," ensuring only those few who "got" bebop attended shows.[129] According to LeRoi Jones, the white people "who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity," despite the reality that "the Negro himself had no choice" in his separation.[130] As more people participated in the underground despite racial codes, spending more time in staple Beat spaces, i.e. coffeehouses, parks, and jazz clubs, the racial boundaries of neighboring communities were challenged and altered. Greenwich Village, for example, quickly became a popular meeting ground for Beats, both black and white. The Italian Americans who lived in the Village increasingly disapproved of the integration happening around them, which led to a backlash in order to maintain racial standards. Clinton Starr argues that "throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, civic groups, law enforcement officials, and municipal government agencies mounted campaigns" to remind the Beats of their proper place and the proper racial codes.[131]

It appears inevitable, therefore, that Bruce became a target of the backlash against the underground. Although he rarely used "obscene" language, his perpetual division of the world into "a hip elect always in advance of [the] mass of straights" who supported institutions like segregation and the nuclear family raised fundamental questions about American ideology versus American behavior.[132] His views on race coincided with the

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[129] Robert Holton, *"The Sordid Hipsters of America:" Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 22. Quotations added around racially enlightened because whites were not necessarily enlightened by today's standards. They often envied blacks for a purity and innocence that was seen as being lost within white middle class America, and developed paternalistic relationships with black Beats and jazz musicians.
[130] LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1963), 188.
[131] Clinton Starr, *"I Want to Be with My Own Kind:" Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 48-49.
[132] Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 91.

Beats and he mocked mainstream America's biases, not African Americans. But he did so through entertainment, not art or intellectual debate. His choice of venue may have made him an easy target because he was a standup comedian, disparaging mainstream America in a more light-hearted fashion than the Beats, producing the illusion that it was more legitimate to censor him. His routine "The Defiant Ones" illustrates that despite questioning segregation, Bruce's challenge was not as overt, however, as congregating interracially. Bruce impersonated an ignorant, presumably southern, man having an epiphany about equality while he and Miller, an African American, worked together escaping from prison. At the same time, this bit was not as critical as his "How to Relax Your Colored Friends" bit because he provided that audience with more concrete evidence that he was not mocking them.

> Bruce [with southern drawl]: 'Boy I tell ya something Randy, my daddy would – if he ever heard me say this, but standin' next to ya like this and bein' chained up to ya and havin' them hounds follow us is shown me something. It's opened up my eyes. You won't believe this Randy, but it's taught me lesson.'
> Miller: 'What's that?'
> Bruce: 'I'm taller then you [laughter]. And bein' taller then you is a lesson in equality in itself.' [audience laughter]
> Miller: 'Speakin' of equality, I wonder if there'll ever be any equality.'
> Bruce: 'Why there is Randy. Don't forget to play the Star Spangled Banner. It takes both the white keys *and* the dark keys [long and loud laughter]. In fact Randy, you just think about it, just for a little while … everybody's equal … At income tax time, doncha get a chance to pay income tax like everybody else?'
> Miller: 'Yeah.'
> Bruce: 'That's equal, ain't it?'[133]

In addition to mocking racism, Bruce lampooned white liberals' belief that African Americans had achieved equality by pointing out that it was only in sacrifice that whites and African Americans were somewhat equal. His portrayal of an ignorant southern white man allowed the audience to assume that they were among the educated and enlightened who no longer thought in this manner. However, for those who thought

[133] Lenny Bruce, *The Lenny Bruce Originals, vol. 2*, Fantasy Records, 1960.

segregation was important, or were not aware of their own complacency, Bruce's ridicule could appear mean-spirited and unfunny. Moreover, because standup was traditionally a form of commercial entertainment, dependent on audience laughter for success, those who did not appreciate Bruce's humor may have felt comfortable censoring him because they made similar decisions about which entertainment to accept or reject every day.

Bruce reflected the Beats' desire to remove themselves from a society that disregarded the hypocrisy of demanding freedom in other countries while suppressing freedom within U.S. borders, and he was able to exploit Americans' "cynicism towards the very changes that were being heralded as realizing the American Dream." [134] Unfortunately, the shift in his humor that resulted from his rise in popularity also revealed how much the success of his comedy depended upon the audience. Unlike the Beats, who were viewed as authentically participating in an alternative culture, Bruce appeared willing to compromise. He performed comedy based on the audience's reception, tailoring it to reflect their sensitivities. This apparent willingness to change his routines failed him, however, because although he altered his comedy slightly so as not to completely offend mainstream audiences, he did not alter the basic characteristics he had forged while performing for the underground. He refused to observe the conventions of "polite" entertainment and continued discussing sensitive topics. For those who did not enjoy his comedy, this may have appeared contradictory to standup's purpose as a validating entertainment form, leaving Bruce vulnerable because his intent was to shock

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[134] Joseph Boskin, *"The Giant and the Child,"* 190. See also Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Americans were becoming concerned with the conformity that supposedly encouraged their success by creating a demand for goods. Bruce tapped into this by ridiculing the conformity, which initially intrigued mainstream America.

and offend mainstream audiences with his "night club obscenities."[135] In his determination to gain fame, Bruce became an affront to the mainstream "community." His constant negotiation with his audiences permitted them to laugh without contemplating the implications of what he said. Although they may have found it "a little disconcerting" that they laughed and possibly "agree[d] on more than a few scores with this beatnik buffoon" most Americans saw him as an outsider and an entertainer, providing no real valuable commentary.[136]

[135] Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticket," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 28, 1961, pg. 12.
[136] Will Leonard, "Lenny and Henny – Beatnik Buffoon, Cynical Clown," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1959, pg. E8.

CHAPTER FOUR

LENNY BRUCE AND HIS "ART:" DEFENDING THE RIGHT TO SAY "TITS"

Despite gaining mainstream popularity, Bruce faced many obstacles garnering the mass following achieved by Bob Hope or Johnny Carson. As an underground comedian, he critiqued mainstream America, establishing a sense of "community" with his early audiences. He continued this trend upon achieving mainstream attention, but his new audiences, and many within the general population overall, may have found it difficult to appreciate him for what he was: an ad-libber, whose performances were "improvised and haphazard – a blueprint rather than a finished product."[137] Bruce was not a member of the mainstream community, but rather, a representative of the "other" community of the underground. Even those who believed Bruce provided "mental therapy" continued portraying him as an outsider who was "so way-out that he ma[de] the wackiest listener feel comfortably sane by comparison."[138] It appears that mainstream America did not embrace Bruce as someone with an intimate understanding of their foibles, but rather, an "exotic" foreigner representing how "outsiders" thought and lived. These images exacerbated his separation from the mainstream, creating a distant fascination for him where audiences were intrigued and curious about his brand of humor, but did not see similarities between themselves and Bruce. He was more accessible than other underground figures because he performed standup, but he was isolated from the

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[137] Thomas Lask, "Foolery – Funny and Not Funny," *New York Times*, August 9, 1959, pg. X9. Lask intended to criticize Bruce for not adhering to traditional standards of standup comedy. From the perspective of appreciating Bruce for what he was, however, this becomes a compliment because he successfully provided comedy that represented the Beats and jazz.

[138] Will Leonard, "Lenny Bruce is a 'Sick' Comic, But He's Also Slick," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1959, pg. F10.

mainstream community because he continued cultivating his act with underground sensibilities.

As a result, Bruce developed multiple images within mainstream America. He was labeled "sick," categorizing him as a specific comic with a specific audience. His inversion of traditional comedy effectively introduced a new form of standup to mainstream Americans, forcing a redefinition of satire, obscenity, and entertainer. He combined the critic with the comic and for many Americans these categories were not interchangeable, leading many to wonder "[w]hat happened to the healthy comedian who just got up there and showed everybody a good time and didn't preach, didn't have to resort to knocking religion … and telling dirty toilet jokes?"[139] His ability to move beyond traditional comedy and find a new form hindered his acceptance and recognition as a legitimate black humorist. This ultimately placed Bruce in the legal troubles he found himself immersed in during the 1960s. He diverged from black humor, broadening the parameters of legitimate targets for satire, but he also became harder to categorize as either a comic or a satirist, because no one else had done the same. The tension within mainstream America regarding the underground played out in the courtrooms surrounding Bruce's demand for recognition as a legitimate critic and satirist of American cultural logic which would have enabled him to define his work as art.

Beginning in 1961, Bruce found himself embroiled in obscenity trials to determine whether he was an artist, and therefore protected under the First Amendment's right to free speech, or if he was an obscene entertainer who merely shocked his audiences with his rants by appealing to "prurient interests." Despite being convicted for obscenity in all his major trials, "Bruce never served a proper prison sentence,"

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[139] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), 125.

suggesting that the judges in his trials did not take his "crimes" seriously.[140] The irony of his arrests was that police officers placed Bruce in his legal troubles in spite of, rather than because of, the public's reaction to him. To the extent that the public registered any opinion of Bruce, it was favorable as many in the public attended his shows. Police officers did not need a warrant for his arrest and could arrest him if they alone determined his behavior "offensive." Bruce incorporated this "flaw" of the judicial system into his comedy, arguing against the police department's arbitrary power to determine whether or not he was obscene, forcing him to defend himself when his popularity was on the rise.

> "When it's the law out front, then no one has any excuse. No priest can be in a whorehouse, blessing, kissing them, saving them [laughter] No cop can be – no bullshit. Everybody's up for grabs that's it. Stay outta there. That means everybody. No protecting, no local home rules whores [laughter]. My position is that since the Constitution says that, there has to be judicial superintendence then no peace officer has *any* place talking to anyone or making *any* inquiry whatsoever. Search warrant is prerequisite to the inquiry. Because if he's allowed to make any investigation, for a noise even, then he's allowed to make determinations of who looks suspicious. And the only people who look suspicious to Jews are Irish drunks [laughter]. So it's all bullshit conclusions. Who could look suspicious? So you have suspicious looking people like Nigger town, Whore town, Polack town, Kike town – You can't hear the noise unless he sees the crime, solid. Otherwise, he can take the police car and stick two ex-convicts, friends of his [laughter], and say 'Look, here is the area that I'm sworn to protect. We're gonna break in this warehouse and I'll lay outside dead. We'll haul the shit away in my car [laughter]. If anybody comes on us, we're investigating, and if we get caught in the end, we just arrested you [laughter]. Alright, solid? Solid [laughter].'"[141]

Bruce argued that the power bestowed on the police department allowed officers to arrest anyone they wanted to, according to their own prejudices, without oversight. Once Bruce went to court, the burden of proving that despite being "offensive" there were people, like Ralph J. Gleason who believed the "'predominant theme'" of his performances was "'the

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[140] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge), 92. See also, Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Media Fusion, 2002). In both Chicago and San Francisco, Bruce was convicted but given probation or community service and the verdicts were overturned later. In New York, he was found guilty and in 2003 the governor of New York overturned his conviction, much to the amusement of many of Bruce's fans.

[141] Lenny Bruce, *The Berkeley Concert*, Bizarre Planet, 1969.

search for ultimate truth that lies beneath the social hypocrisy in which we live.'"[142] The police department's ability to decide Bruce was offensive forced him to prove his relevance as a satirist who provided valid social criticism, and not a comedian, a distinction that appeared inconsequential until 1961.

Achieving the label artist would have placed Bruce in the same genre as great satirists like Mark Twain whose humorous commentary on American society was representative of satire and applauded as great art. This would have provided Bruce with protection under the First Amendment, producing "a whole set of prepared rationalizations that justified his art."[143] Unfortunately, the trials focused on his use of specific words and whether or not he appealed to prurient interests. This narrow focus relegated Bruce to the status of an offensive entertainer who performed shocking material for a profit, and although the courts recognized that he laced his routines with social commentary, his monologues "were merely a device" he used to "exploit the use of obscene language" and not for expressing frustration or social commentary.[144] With the luxury of hindsight it seems obvious that Bruce deserved First Amendment protection, whether or not he offended his audiences, but in the early 1960s, it appears that art was more narrowly defined. Despite straight America's failures at censoring the underground, specifically the Beats, Bruce was successfully targeted and censored. Why was he considered an entertainer and therefore subject to standards of decency? How was he different from the Beats in a way that enabled police and District Attorneys to decide he should be censored?

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[142] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 145.
[143] Neil Schaeffer, "Lenny Bruce Without Tears," *College English*, vol. 37 no. 6 (1976): 572.
[144] Justice John Murtagh, "People v. Bruce: Majority Opinion," *The People v. Lenny Bruce: Excerpts from the Café Au Go Go Trial*, www.law.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007).

This chapter will explore the fine line Bruce straddled between comedian and artist, examining how the shift in his comedy based on audience reception ultimately hinted at the possibility that Bruce was driven by market place demands. Being a commercial entertainer stereotyped Bruce as one who sought majority approval for success, raising questions about whether or not his inclusion of "dirty" words was really how the majority wanted to be entertained. The venue through which Bruce chose to criticize American logic and culture also complicated his attempts to portray himself as an artist because of the history of standup comedy. As a form of commercial entertainment, standup was expected to validate audiences' sensibilities and reflect their preference of comedy. According to the police and prosecutors in his trials, this preference did not include any discussion about "hanging a sign on a person exposed" to generate money and claim a ticket taker "Is Going To Kiss It."[145] Bruce's personification of a hipster and his legitimization of both the underground and standup comedy as an artistic expression effectively placed him on the periphery of mainstream culture because he was a comic who did not follow the rules of comedy but supposedly sought fame and success based on appealing to prurient interests. Because he chose standup to "express" himself, Bruce was expected to alter his comedy to reflect his audiences' sensibilities and find a way to be funny without using obscenity because that was assumed to be the "community standard" of mainstream entertainment. The Beats' efforts to "expand the legal definition of free speech" were restricted to artists who produced works that provided valuable criticism or expression, no matter what the

[145] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 134. The prosecutor in the case was referring to a bit Bruce performed about how he did not trust ticket takers at show because they controlled the money. He claimed he was going to set up a booth where the ticket taker could not see him, expose himself, and hang a sign on his penis that said when he earned $1500, the ticket taker was going to kiss his penis.

public's reception was, and it was difficult for Bruce to argue that he produced the same brand of commentary as artists because he used commercial entertainment, which immediately implied a different intent in his use of obscenity.[146]

At first glance, it may appear surprising that Bruce was unsuccessful in arguing for First Amendment protection given the failure to successfully prosecute other underground figures. According to Peter Levy and Clinton Starr, "[m]any … battles involving 'Beat' figures" transpired in response to mainstream America's concentration on restricting poetry readings and thus blocking Beat congregation.[147] Local communities passed laws requiring that coffeehouses obtain entertainment permits in order to deter the many people who regularly attended poetry readings, black and white, from integrating. As police and government officials increased their efforts to censor Beat writers, the Beats demonstrated that they "were willing and able to engage themselves in political and legal battles" to defend their "constitutional right to write, publish, and distribute their works."[148] In addition, less famous participants responded to the increased harassment, intimidation and censorship with protests and marches similar to what would be seen in the 1960s and formed organizations like the Coffeehouse Trade and Civic Association and the North Beach Citizens' Committee to aid underground figures financially in legal proceedings, raise bail, and educate people on their civil rights.[149] Despite the active efforts of local communities to censor the Beats, the Beats

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[146] Peter B. Levy, *Beating the Censor: The "Howl" Trial Revisited*, In *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen, Jaap van der Bent, and Mel van Elteren (Amsterdam: VU University, 1999), 114.
[147] Ibid, 113.
[148] Ibid, 107.
[149] Clinton Starr, *"I Want to Be with My Own Kind:" Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture*, In *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). Starr argues that despite the stereotype of the Beats being apolitical and nihilistic, such actions demonstrate that they were in fact quite vocal and resistant to the harassment. For example, the Gaslight was a coffee

successfully contested persecution in the courts by arguing that their rights to free speech were suppressed.

The most famous example, and the one that affected Bruce directly, was the *Howl* trial of 1957. San Francisco charged Lawrence Ferlinghetti with "printing and selling lewd and indecent material in an attempt to prevent Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and other poems* from being published.[150] Ferlinghetti's lawyers utilized the 1957 *Roth v. United States* Supreme Court decision defining obscenity as oral and printed material that offended a community or appealed to prurient interests, with no redeeming social value.[151] The defense successfully demonstrated that once *Howl* was considered in its entirety, it represented a "serious work of art," and was thus protected by the First Amendment.[152] Although the trial focused on the published version of *Howl*, the decision carried over to oral presentation as well because the judge determined that there was no real distinction between written and oral material. Just as people can elect not to buy a book they believe will be obscene, so too can they decide not to attend a public reading where the same book will be read aloud.

Bruce attempted to use this same argument to defend his comedy, employing eyewitnesses who argued that he was an artist "performing … the art of verbal and visual improvisation, built up little by little over a series of performances."[153] Unfortunately, he

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shop in New York that was closed down for operating without the appropriate permits. The owner, John Mitchell, organized and "led a protest march of one hundred beatniks and was arrested for disorderly conduct." (50).

[150] Peter B. Levy, *Beating the Censor*, 109.

[151] Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce*, 32. Collins and Skover offer more details into the background of how and why these criteria became the standard to determine obscenity. For the purpose here, however, it is not necessary to know the contestations within the Supreme Court itself on what is obscene.

[152] Peter B. Levy, *Beating the Censor*, 110.

[153] Jules Feiffer, "Testimony of Jules Feiffer on Direct Examination," *The People v. Lenny Bruce: Excerpts from the Café Au Go Go Trial*, www.law.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007).

had difficulty convincing the judges and prosecutors that his work had to be considered in its entirety to illustrate his criticisms. The fact that he found critics who applauded his work demonstrated that there was no "single overall 'community standard'" of obscenity.[154] By focusing on the narrow question of whether or not Bruce appealed to prurient interests, the courts ignored the overall criticisms provided throughout his routines, and instead focused on whether or not he could have used different words and maintained the same criticisms. Judges and juries unfamiliar with Bruce's comedy seemed unwilling to acknowledge that around specific words was a routine "forc[ing] us to redefine what we mean by 'being shocked,'" and that his choice of words helped demonstrate that "shock" was subjective.[155] This is easily demonstrated in his San Francisco trial where his use of "cocksucker" led to his first major arrest. The defense argued that Bruce's "performance … was in the great tradition of social satire, related intimately to the kind of social satire found in the works of such great authors as Aristophanes, [and] Jonathon Swift."[156] While the prosecutor seemed to acknowledge that Bruce was attempting to criticize straight American sensibilities towards homosexual men, it was the inclusion of the word "cocksucker" that overshadowed all social commentary, making the routine obscene.

> "First gig I ever worked up here was a place called Ann's 440 [pause] which was across the street. And I got a call and a guy says:
> 'There's a place in San Francisco [pause] but uh, they've changed the policy.'
> 'Well what's the policy?' [laughter]
> 'Well they're not there anymore that's the main thing.' [laughter]
> 'Well what kind of a show is it man?'
> 'Well you know – '
> 'Well no I don't know, man. It sounds kind of a weird show.'
> 'Well it's not a show. They're a bunch of *cocksuckers*, that's all [laughter]. A damn fag show.'

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[154] J. Randall Creel, "People v. Bruce: Dissent Opinion," *The People v. Lenny Bruce: Excerpts fro the Café Au Go Go Trial*, www.law.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007).
[155] Kenneth Tynan, *Forward*, In *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), vii.
[156] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 141.

> 'Oh? [nervous laugh] Well that is a pretty *bizarre* show [laughter]. Uh – I don't know what I could do in that kind of a *show*.' [laughter]
> 'Well no, it's – we want you to change all that.' [laughter]
> 'Well Chris – Uh I don't – that's a big gig, uh [laughter] I can just tell them to stop doing it.'"[157]

What is difficult to understand from simply reading this bit is that Bruce's purpose was to mock "cocksucker's" definition as a pejorative term towards homosexual men. Bruce acted out how confusing a conversation could be for someone familiar only with the non-sexual definition of the word "cock," such as a male chicken or arming a firearm.[158] The audience's laughter did not always rise immediately after the "punch line," implying that Bruce produced certain facial expressions or hand gestures, letting the audience know he had no idea how his performance would fit into a show of people sucking on chickens. The arresting officers claimed they determined Bruce was obscene because he used "lewd conversation [and] lewd gestures" which they argued "constitute[d] an objectionable show."[159] Despite the reality that Bruce performed at a club surrounded by burlesque clubs with strippers and female impersonators, it appears that his discussion of "cocksucker" appealed to prurient interests by insulting community standards of behavior. However, without hearing the bit, the jury was not made aware of Bruce's objective for using "cocksucker." "[Bits], of course, are meant to be performed," and by doing so, Bruce could have argued more effectively for his social value by demonstrating how euphemisms can only be offensive if one is aware of their existence, and therefore, the word should not immediately be indecent.[160]

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[157] Lenny Bruce, *To Is a Preposition; Come is a Verb*, Knitting Factory, 2000. Emphasis added to show Bruce's change in tone or his stress on a word.
[158] Webster' New World Dictionary and Thesarus (1996) s.v. "cock."
[159] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 135.
[160] John Cohen, *Forward*, In *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, ed. John Cohen (London: MacMillan, 1972), 10.

Unfortunately, Bruce was not viewed as an artist, which left him with no protection under the First Amendment. He faced numerous obstacles, some of which he created himself, in trying to legitimize his work as satire. One such difficulty lies within Americans' assumptions about standup comedy, its purpose, and the dynamic between comedian and audience. Standup comedy originated from minstrelsy and vaudeville, both of which "appealed to average Americans, primarily working-class men, by attacking women's rights, the temperance movement, and making fun of a variety of intellectuals, experts, and authority figures."[161] Minstrelsy achieved its popularity during slavery by flaunting white stereotypes of African Americans to primarily white audiences. Its actors were usually white men, and sometimes women, who "blacked up," impersonating African Americans while "claim[ing] to [authentically] represent black culture and to dramatize slave life in the South."[162] The relationship that developed between the actors and audience was one of "private" mockery. African Americans were generally not allowed to participate or perform, leaving whites free to "alter black culture" as necessary to maintain white stereotypes.[163] Over time, African Americans found ways to join in, "blacking up" as well, portraying themselves to audiences as stereotypical black slaves who were ignorant, happy, musical and loyal, but also utilizing minstrelsy's ambiguity and mocking white audiences for those same stereotypical qualities.[164] This naturally altered the dynamic between performer and audience because it was no longer white people mocking African Americans "privately," but rather,

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[161] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8.
[162] Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 10.
[163] Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), 63.
[164] See Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania* for a discussion of the multiple interpretations audiences could develop around minstrelsy's portrayal of African Americans, class, and gender.

multiple portrayals resulting in numerous interpretations of African Americans, white stereotypes and the relationship between the two. Like Bruce, African American minstrel players inverted the traditional relationship with the audience, making the audience the "butt of the jokes" because of its stereotypes.[165]

As a result, minstrelsy began losing its appeal and vaudeville rose up "from a divided theatrical world" of diverse entertainers and audiences to develop a broader form of entertainment that was more inclusive than minstrelsy, "forg[ing] a mass audience: a heterogeneous crowd of white men and women of different classes and ethnic groups" to become a national phenomenon.[166] Alison Kibler argues that "whereas the minstrel show largely responded to the national debate over slavery," vaudeville focused on the reality that different ethnic groups, races, classes and genders interacted more often and more intimately.[167] Essentially, it "aspire[d] to bourgeois standardization [without] neglect[ing] working-class immigrant pride" by providing more ambiguous interpretations than minstrelsy.[168] Vaudevillian comedy sketches quickly became popular by providing the same brand of burlesque as minstrelsy, utilizing audience stereotypes of groups not necessarily present, particularly ethnic groups. Comedians typically generated sympathy from their audience by deriding themselves as inferior or portraying inferior "outsiders" desperately trying to fit in mainstream society but failing humorously and often.

Both minstrelsy and vaudeville were viewed as primarily entertainment, meaning they provided escapism for the audience. Vaudevillian comedy sketches maintained the "privacy" that minstrelsy developed allowing audiences to laugh at the follies of outsiders.

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[165] Jim Cullen, *Art of Democracy*, 59.
[166] M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 9.
[167] Ibid, 115.
[168] Ibid, 11.

If entertainers did utilize multiple interpretations of their subjects to mock the audience, it was typically done so in a light-hearted fashion with minimum scrutiny toward the audience.[169] This form of "standup" remained popular until the 1950s and into the 1960s, allowing comedians like Bob Hope and Will Rogers, who both started their careers in vaudeville, to remain extremely popular. However, this also limited comedy's legitimacy for providing social commentary or satire. Traditionally, comedians who provided social criticism or performed serious works did so outside of standup comedy.[170] While performing comedy, standup artists merely entertained, with limited or inconsequential criticisms, providing a good time for the audience that did not require self-reflection. Audiences, therefore, encountered the comedian as separate from the serious critic, leaving the comedian with no real value other than entertainment. Comedy provided temporary leisure for those who paid to watch it, and for most Americans, standup was not a form of satire, or art.

So long as Bruce remained primarily popular within the underground, he maintained the traditional comedian-audience relationship by mocking mainstream America, portraying its logic and cultural sensibilities as inferior to the underground's. For example, his repeated rebukes of those who defined sex as "dirty" primarily mocked mainstream Americans' flawed interpretation of sex. When performed for underground audiences, the bits "represent[ed] conduct to be ridiculed and rejected," allowing the audience's laughter to reflect their superiority, maintaining the traditional comedic

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[169] See Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* vol. 37 no. 1 (1985): 71-80.

[170] Will Rogers particularly wrote a weekly column called "Will Rogers Says," published from 1922 until his death in 1935 in syndicated newspapers throughout the country. See Will Rogers, *Will Rogers' Daily Telegrams*, ed. James M. Smallwood and Steven K. Grogert (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1978).

relationship.[171] However, when performed for mainstream audiences, the bits transformed into social criticism or satire that could humor audiences but also suggest a need for self-reflection on whether or not their definition of sex was appropriate.

> "O.K. what goes on in *Psycho*? We have, uh, Tony Perkins, a psychotic misogynist, kill a beautiful woman for no purpose. *Stabs* her. We show method, blood down the drain and then method of disposal. The body – they really get ponderous with it – wrap it in a shower curtain, to the swamps and then some. This is not against the law and I never hear the postmaster gettn' [huffy voice] 'What, that's bad for out kids to see.' Na, it's cool. Now what goes on in the dirty movie? The sixteen millimeter reduction print that you schlepped from lodge hall to lodge hall [laughter]. The dirty movie that the Kefauver committee destroys and then recreates for private parties [applause and laughter]. *That* dirty movie. Alright. What are the couple *doing* in that picture? Any communist propaganda? Anyone getting slapped? Any violence? What are *they doing man* that's so offensive? From an artistic concept, yeah trite. No music track, forget it [laughter] … So the values are, for children to look at, killing YES, but *schtuping*, NO man [laughter]
> Nervous voice: 'If they ever see any *schtuping* they may do that someday, man, and uh what'll happen then?'"[172]

Bruce had difficulty generating sympathy from mainstream audiences because he did not portray inferior "outsiders." He examined mainstream logic, implied that his own was superior, and criticized the audience's assumptions of why pornography was inappropriate. His comedy required the audience be self-effacing and laugh at their inability to accurately follow their own ideology. This altered the comedic relationship because Bruce appeared to be talking down to his audiences not validating them. This shift in the comedian-audience relationship changed Bruce's comedy from entertainment to satire because he ridiculed the audience's vices and follies with sarcasm to provide commentary on the flaws of mainstream society.[173] The origins of standup comedy, however, made him a new phenomenon for most Americans because standup did not historically produce self-reflection.

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[171] Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," 74.
[172] Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert*, Blue Note Records, 1961. Except for movie title, italics added to indicate where Bruce stressed a word.
[173] Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus (1996), s.v. "satire."

In addition, the traditional versions of satire and social commentary also marginalized Bruce as a legitimate satirist, and therefore artist. Satire and social commentary were traditionally provided as written expression, primarily found in novels, academic journals or popular media venues that sought to bridge serious and popular culture like newspapers, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. It was expected that writers, editors, artists, scholars, etc. would provide commentary on American culture, and do so in a superior manner, often times laced with humor.[174] This was legitimate satire and expression of frustration, providing an outlet for "authors" to share their observations with "audiences" regardless of whether or not their opinions were popular.

The Beats, however, introduced oral expression as another viable option for articulating one's alienation and anger, which was primarily done through novel and poetry readings. Despite their preference for reading their works aloud, the Beats maintained legitimacy as social commentators because they continued writing and publishing their works. Those who did not appreciate the disarming, chaotic, and critical style could still view the Beats' works as literature and poetry, allowing the Beats to maintain a certain level of respect among their critics. The same could be said of jazz and bebop. Those who did not enjoy or appreciate bebop at least recognized it as music, allowing comparison between it and other forms of music.[175]

Bruce, however, had difficulty establishing his comedy as satire because, unlike Kerouac or Ginsberg, he did not incorporate his comedy into poetry or writing, even if his commentary was similar. Clinton Starr argues that during the heyday of Beat

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[174] See Andrew Ross, *No Respect*. Ross argues that elites and intellectuals continuously commented on American culture, particularly popular culture, acting as "inspector[s] of the nation's cultural health." 51.
[175] This could also be said of black humorists like Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, and Hubert Selby Jr. All criticized American society using similar humor as Bruce, but they did so through literature.

"mania" a distinction was made between the Beat Generation and beatniks, to distinguish authentic participation. Writers like William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac were considered true Beats, primarily because they produced writings expressing their disillusionment with mainstream America. Beatniks were their followers, participating in the culture because it spoke to their own disillusionment, or they merely found it hip and trendy. Americans within both the mainstream and underground "highlight[ed] the aesthetic achievements of Beat celebrities and denigrate[d] the beatniks 'who [could not] write'" precisely because social criticism was traditionally written.[176] Most Americans ignored the lifestyle as a genuine expression of dissatisfaction, reducing any member of the culture who did not write to the status of an imitator with no real contribution to make to the discussion of American culture.

Although Bruce was not necessarily seen as a beatnik, but he appears to have been likened to beatniks because he used standup comedy to express his criticisms. Standup comedy was not expected to provide illuminating commentary, and despite similarities with the Beats' distortion of traditional literature, Bruce's critics still saw his routines as standup comedy. He did not eloquently profess a new ideology, encouraging his audiences to open their minds by angering them at the inconsistencies of their lives. He was much more straightforward in his criticisms and generated laughter at serious topics or "normal" behavior in a very crude, blunt manner. His bit "Tits and Ass" illustrates this point. In it, Bruce very clearly questioned Americans' denunciation of sex when popular tourist sites promoted and flaunted sex, but he did not use euphemisms to

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[176] Clinton Starr, *"I Want to Be with My Own Kind,"* 41. Starr goes on to argue that this distinction should not be made because there could not have been an underground culture without members who were influenced by the writers; and that "'Beat' and 'beatniks' here designate an individual who was attracted to bohemian enclaves as sites in which widespread attitudes and habits, such as Cold War politics, racial segregation, heterosexuality, and valorization of commodity consumption, could be transgressed." (42).

make his point. Rather, he included vernacular, everyday language demonstrating the commonness of sex in daily life.

> "Now. You'd assume that in a society that says, 'Alright, this is clean; this is dirty' – that in the entertainment capital of that society, the entertainment capital of the world, Las Vegas, that the attraction would be the most austere. What's the attraction at Las Vegas?
> 'Well, at the Stardust we have the Passion Play.'
> 'Correct; then they're consistent. What follows the Passion Play?'
> 'Well, I think they're having a Monet exhibit … It's a very spiritual type of show.'
> Is that the attraction that all the purists support in Lass Vegas?
> No. What's the attraction? Tits and ass.
> '*I beg you pardon?*'
> 'Ah, tits and ass, that's what the attraction is.'
> '*Just* tits and ass?'
> 'Oh no. An Apache team and tits and ass.'
> Well, that's about all I actually go to see – the Apache team. And that's just one hotel. What's the second biggest attraction?'
> 'More tits and ass.'
> '*Get off it!* The third?'
> 'Tits and ass, and more ass, and tits, and ass and tits and ass and tits and ass.'
> 'Do you mean to tell me that *Life* magazine would devote three full pages to tits and ass?'
> 'Yes. Right next to articles by Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. *Life* and *Look* and *Nugget* and *Rogue* and *Dude* and *Cavalier* and *Swank* and *Gent* and *Pageant* (the Legion of Decency's *Playboy*) and millions of other stroke books – the antecedent to *Playboy*, *National Geographic* with the African chicks – oh yes, they're stroke books.
> It takes the seriousness out of everything if you can imagine Kennedy in back of the bathroom door whacking it to Miss July once in a while. I stroke it once in a while; I assume he does."[177]

Bruce's inclusion of vernacular language for women's bodies and his claim that mainstream publications like *Life* and *National Geographic* were "stroke books" possibly reduced his ability to argue he was a social commentator and satirist because he blatantly discussed sex without subtlety or eloquence. Although he rejected mainstream America's definition of "growing up," like the Beats, he encouraged his audiences to laugh *with* him as a standup comedian at the hilarity of saying "tits." The inclusion of four-letter words, according to the courts, "insulted sex and debased it" for the purpose of making money off the audience's reaction and not for expressing frustration with the audience's follies.[178]

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[177] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, ed. John Cohen (London: MacMillan, 1972), 43-44. Emphasis in original.
[178] Justice John Murtagh, "People v. Bruce."

This type of comedy produced a leveling effect, with Bruce goading his audiences into recognizing the similarities between themselves and those "outside." For Bruce to claim that most Americans, including President Kennedy, " whack[ed] it" required his audience to admit their curiosity and enjoyment of sex, reducing everyone to the same level of basic physical pleasure.[179] Bruce's revelation that he masturbated maintained the traditional comedic relationship because he mocked himself for his inability to control his urges, but his insistence that the audience did the same argued that if Americans denied it, they were simply hypocritical. This placed Bruce in an interesting position because despite the reality that he provided humorous social commentary, he maintained the same status as other standup comedians. He ridiculed institutions and values that had been "accept[ed] … as natural products of long standing" but through what was traditionally an affirming form of entertainment. Although no one appeared to object to his use of social commentary, his decision to do so with blunt language made him more offensive than other comedians.[180]

According to Kenneth Tynan, Bruce's occupational critics were not necessarily familiar with standup that "[began] as pure hilarity" but could quickly "cool off into a puzzled frown of self-scrutiny," leaving them with no other comparisons except traditional comedians.[181] While some critics, like Will Leonard, believed Bruce was "growing smarter all the time" and applauded "his satire [as] savage, his comments curt and clear, [and] his protests provocative," others appear to have had difficulty

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[179] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 7.
[180] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 236.
[181] Kenneth Tynan, *Forward*, In *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography*, Lenny Bruce (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), vii.

interpreting his standup as a combination of both comedy and satire.[182] These critics' assumptions of what comedy was, was based on the precedent of traditional comedians, which Bruce clearly was not, leaving them to conclude, like Herb Lyon, that he performed "ultra-dirty material" that aimed to shock and offend.[183] In addition, those who were most likely to appreciate his comedy as satire, specifically literary critics and academics, did not appear to have compared Bruce's satire with that of others because his was oral, not written, and he used standup.[184] This did not appear problematic, at least initially, because no group of people vocally rallied against him performing. Those who did not understand or enjoy his comedy simply did not attend his shows or purchase his albums. Once Bruce was arrested for obscenity in 1961, however, it became necessary for the courts to define him in order to determine whether or not his use of obscenity was critically tied to his satire.

It became difficult to define Bruce as a satirist or artist because his constant negotiation with his audiences did not fit with most Americans' characteristics of art. Although many appreciated his impromptu, conversational style, allowing the "undisciplined audiences" to participate in his comedy by altering his routines slightly based on their reception, this skill also worked against him.[185] The inclusion of disclaimers made it appear that Bruce altered his comedy based on market place demands

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[182] Will Leonard, "Blue Note Welcomed Pete Back From Squaresville," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 1, 1960, pg. E16.
[183] Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticket," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 6, 1962, pg. 22.
[184] See Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*. See also, Douglas Linder, *The Lenny Bruce Trials*, www.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007). Once Bruce went to trial, his defense found critics and academics like Ralph J. Gleason, Nat Hentoff, and Herbert Gans testify to the commonality of foul language in everyday life and critique Bruce's comedy as satire. However, prior to his trials, no critics wrote any columns, articles, or even spoke about any comparison between Bruce's comedy and satire.
[185] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 179. Levine uses this quote to discuss the inability of the unwashed masses to appreciate highbrow culture like opera. It applies to Bruce as well because his informal style allowed audiences undisciplined in comedic timing and delivery to participate as they would in informal settings.

by trying to cater more to mainstream sensibilities. This hinted at the possibility that he produced material that would sell, and yet his use of foul language implied that in order for him to make money, he had to shock his audiences. His claims that he produced satire and his use of "dirty" words was merely semantics seemed contradictory to the courts because he not only warned mainstream audiences of shocking bits, but developed bits that appeared specifically created for offending his new audiences. In one bit, he began by warning the audience that he would offend them by using profanity and then mocked the audience's stereotypes of what exactly constituted obscene words or actions.

> "Alright. I'm going to do something you never thought I'd do on stage. I'm going to a bit now that I was arrested for. I'm going to tell you the dirtiest word you've ever heard on stage. It is just *disgusting*!
> I'm not going to look at you when I say, cause this way we won't know who said it. I may blame that cat over there. It's a four-letter word, starts with an 's' and ends with a 't' [pause] and [pause] just don't take me off the stage, just [pause] don't embarrass my Mom. I'll go quietly. The word is – Oh, I'm going to *say* it and just get it *done* with. I'm tired of walking the streets.
> [Whispers] Snot!
> I can't look at you. But that's the word: snot. I know a lot of my friends are thinking now, 'He's so clever, and then, for a cheap laugh, he says 'snot'' … Suppose I tell you something about snot, something that was so unique about snot that you'd go: 'Is that the *truth* about snot?' … Well, I've done some research about snot. How about this about snot: *you can't get snot off a suede jacket*! Take any suede jacket straight from Davega's and throw it in the cleaners and try to run out of the store.
> '*Wait! Stop them!* Alright block the door. *Get them*! Tell the wife to stand over there. [pause] Son, is this your jacket?'
> 'Well, [pause] yeah.'
> 'Son, do you know what this is on the sleeve of the jacket?'
> 'No.'
> '*You wanna go downtown*?!'
> 'No.'
> 'Well, what's on the sleeve?'
> 'Well, [pause] ah [pause] *snot*.'
> 'Son, you know you can't get snot off suede. It's a killer. It kills velvet too … It's ruined. You can flake it off, but the black mark will always be there.'"[186]

Bruce developed this bit after gaining mainstream attention, which allowed him to build up tension by implying that he would say "shit" because the audience's stereotypes assumed that was the disgusting word. Since underground audiences were not "hung up" on profanity's use like the mainstream, the bit's tension building was more effective for

[186] Lenny Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce One*, 33-34.

those who expected to be shocked. Bruce, therefore, warned the audience that he was offensive and then mocked them for assuming that offensive meant swearing. He was not expressing his frustration with profanity's definition, but apparently using that definition to mock and tease the audience while making a profit. He was still negotiating with his audience, producing material based on how he believed it would be received, but he was not transferring material developed in front of underground audiences. Because this bit would have been less effective if performed for underground audiences, its creation for mainstream audiences may have had a more mean-spirited intent due to the negative negotiation of tricking the audience.

Bruce's constant negotiation combined with his constant inclusion of "obscenity" might have been the most damaging factor surrounding his claim to be an artist. Comedy traditionally catered to the majority by mocking the minority, while satire was seen as an art form that incorporated humor to criticize society, and did not necessarily require audience approval to be successful. Satire's traditional characteristic of being written allowed those who produced editorials, articles, books, and even movies, that provided criticism to be considered artists possibly because of the difficulty in altering them based on audience reception. The absence of audience participation in art's creation produced a definition of an artist as one who expressed, performed, or created commentary "for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than mere entertainment" because the conversation between artist and audience was one-sided.[187] The artist spoke or expressed his frustration and the audience "heard," or "read," the commentary, but the artist did not necessarily alter it if the audience did not approve. Bruce had the ability to alter his work frequently, and did so, incorporating the current events of his life in a timely fashion and

[187] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 146.

developing routines that mocked the audience and eventually the entire concept of satire, obscenity, art, and censorship.

In addition, once he began getting arrested and shut down for his performances, Bruce shifted his comedy again to generate sympathy from his audiences for being forced to defend his routines. He began performing material that encouraged the audience to view him as one of them, a member of their "community," and much like traditional comedians, he mocked those outside, specifically those who arrested and tried him. He invited the audience to feel superior to those outside their community because they agreed that he was not offensive. Whereas before Bruce appeared to mock the audience's inconsistencies and satirize their personal hypocrisies, shifting his comedy to generate sympathy encouraged the audience to laugh at those outside, and thus created the same feeling of a private joke typical of traditional standup comedy.

> "San Francisco I got arrested for uh … um [laughter]. I'm not gonna repeat the word because I want to finish the gig here tonight. [laughter] They said it was vernacular for a favorite homosexual practice, a ten letter word. Uh, it's really chic. It's two four letter words and a preposition. [laughter] I can't, uh – I wish I could tell you the word. It starts with a 'c,' but you know what the word is. [laughter] Now it's weird how they manifested that word as homosexual, 'cause I don't. That relates to any contemporary chick I know, [extreme laughter] or would know, or would marry … I get to court, the judge … a red-headed junkyard Jew [laughter] … He [the arresting officer] comes in … 'Your honor, he said *blah blah blah*.' The judge: 'He said blah blah blah?' [laughter] Then the guy really yented it up. 'That's right [loud laughter] I couldn't believe it. There's this guy up on stage in front of women and mixed audience saying *blah blah blah*. The judge: 'This I never heard, blah blah blah. [laughter] '*He said blah blah blah … I'm not gonna lie to ya*' The D.A.: 'The guy said blah blah blah. Look at him. He's smug. He's not gonna repent.'
> Then I dug something. They sorta liked saying blah blah blah. [laughter] Because they said it a few extra times … The baliff is yelling, "What did he say?' They said 'shut up ya blah blah blah' … God damn it's good to say blah blah blah."[188]

Bruce substituted "blah blah blah" for "cocksucker" and the audience knew exactly what he was saying, laughing at its use because it produced the same effect as "cocksucker." Not only was Bruce burlesquing the idea that saying certain words was illegal, he

[188] Lenny Bruce, *To Is a Preposition*.

suggested that its use was liberating as when people in the courtroom shouted it repeatedly to each other. He still satirized the same hypocrisy he always had by discussing a word the audience was well aware of, despite the assumption that it was supposedly an offensive word, but the intent of his mockery appears to have shifted. Artists were believed to express themselves out of some inner turmoil that alienated them from society and only found acceptance through their work and should, therefore, be respected no matter how critical or "offensive" they were. Although one could argue that Bruce fit that description, using the complications of his daily life to express his frustrations through humor, bits like the one above did not seem to fit easily into that description. Continuously shifting his humor to create improvisation, and in this case sympathy, alluded to the possibility that he was simply angry at the inconvenience of being arrested. He did not appear to be trying to illuminate the audience of their hypocrisies and anger them at the injustices of his arrests. Rather, he mocked those who arrested him because they prevented him from continuing to perform as he wished, by using "obscenity" to shock the audience into laughter.

The assumption that Bruce constantly altered his work to generate more shock worked against him throughout his career because he was expected to alter his comedy to produce "cleaner" material as well. This expectation created tension because Bruce viewed his work as critically tied to the topics and words he used while those who demanded cleaner comedy apparently did not see the connection. For example, national television was an important venue for comedians to gain attention, but for Bruce to secure spots on television shows, his typically crass material had to be cleaned up. His desire for fame led him to seek television exposure, suggesting he was willing to tame his

comedy, but his definition of appropriate comedy differed from that of television executives. For Bruce, this appears to have been a battle over maintaining the authenticity of his art. For executives, because he always shifted his comedy anyway, it seemed that doing the act in a more traditional comedic way should not have altered his material so much so that his overall routine could not remain in tact.

> "They sat me down there, and I'm doing the bit for 15 guys … I have a tattoo on my arm, and because of this tattoo, I can never be buried in a Jewish cemetery. That's the Orthodox law. You have to go out of the world the same way you came in – no marks, no changes.
> Anyway, I told how, when I got back from Malta and went home to Long Island … and my Aunt Mema saw the tattoo. So she flips. A real Jewish yell. 'Look what you did! You ruined your arm! You're no better than a gypsy!' So the producer says that I can't do this on the show because it would definitely be offensive to the Jewish people … I argued with them. I said if they wouldn't let me do that, I wouldn't do the show. Now I'll never use four-letter words for shock value – it has to fit and swing with the character whom I want to say it – but I know I can't use four-letter words on television in *any* case. But here, I wasn't making any such references. I was just doing a true bit.
> They had a meeting about it. They argued for about an hour while I was kept waiting in a corner, like a leper with a bell on my neck. 'We talked it over, Lenny. You know, it's not only offensive to the Jewish people, but it's definitely offensive to the Gentile people too … [W]hat you're saying in essence is that the Gentiles don't *care* what they bury.'
> The funny thing is, friends of mine are always showing me anti-Semitic articles … And then I dug something. Liberals will buy anything a bigot writes … George Lincoln Rockwell, head of the American Nazi Party, is probably a very knowledgeable businessman with no political convictions whatsoever. He gets three bucks a head and works the mass rallies consisting of nothing but angry Jews, shaking their fists and wondering why there are so many Jews there."[189]

Despite his efforts to argue that his comedy was satire and could not arbitrarily be altered without changing its meaning, Bruce was expected to change his comedy because he was an entertainer. He depended on the audience's approval, and therefore, should cater to their desires. This assumption existed parallel to the reality that Bruce did somewhat cater to his audiences' desires. His comedy gained popularity for being edgy and satirical, and those who paid to see him wanted to see that same comedy, but they paradoxically also demanded it in a less threatening, traditional style.

This apparent willingness to alter his comedy may have ultimately hindered Bruce's acquisition of the label artist. Whereas artists were not necessarily expected to

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[189] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 197-198.

alter their material if deemed offensive because it "'[was] part of the essence of the picture'" the artist created, Bruce's negotiation with his audience implied that his material was not as critically tied to the use of specific words.[190] In the *Howl* trial, for example, Professor Mark Shorer, among many other critics, testified on behalf of the defense that the "words Ginsberg chose were central to the tone he sought to create" and the judge agreed that while Ginsberg could have used different words, "'whether or not it would have served the same purpose [was] another thing'" and not within the realm of the government's power to decide.[191] Because Bruce did improvise his routines based on who he thought his audiences were while maintaining the basic critical edge of his underground roots, the prosecutors in his trials argued that he "[could] be amusing … without utilizing any … four-letter words or combination of them."[192] The assumption of an artist's creative license conflicted with the reality that Bruce's constant negotiation allowed him to tame his acts somewhat, and reduced his performances to entertainment and not art. While Bruce insisted that he did not change his comedy, but performed as if in a conversation, which could naturally alter itself to be more amusing, his claim that "obscenity" was part of daily conversation clashed with prosecutors' perception of what constituted the "community's" standard of art.[193] Critics, like Dorothy Kilgallen, argued that Bruce included foul language because "he felt it was necessary [because] .. he was expressing [something] all humans feel and he was sympathizing with it," but prosecutors

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[190] Peter B. Levy, *Beating the Censor*, 111.
[191] Ibid, 111.
[192] Richard A. Kuh, "Cross-Examination of Dorothy Kilgallen," *The People v. Lenny Bruce: Excerpts from the Café Au Go Go Trial*, www.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007).
[193] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 197. Bruce claimed this was what made a comic, someone who allowed change and improvised.

objected to the idea that because Bruce believed certain words were necessary, they should be considered so.[194]

This appears to have been the fine line Bruce argued against when defending his routines. Art did not depend on the audience's approval for success and could include obscenity to fully express the artist's "picture." Bruce's "art," however, required the audience's approval to even be noticed, and his work had to cater to their sensibilities, which meant that his inclusion of obscenity could only be intended to shock and offend the audience because he did not respect "community standards" of decency. His maintenance of his hipster image and controversial topics, despite taming his act slightly, demonstrated to the courts that the obscenity "may be unnecessary to [the] story" Bruce claimed he was telling.[195]

Unfortunately, Bruce's claim to be a legitimate satirist, and thus artist, fell on deaf ears within the courtrooms because his "monologues contained little or no literary or artistic merit" to justify his use of words like "tits," "motherfucker," or "ass."[196] The judges and prosecutors simply did not view standup as an art form through which social commentary could be shared, especially by using profanity and appealing to prurient interests. This expectation of standup changed, almost immediately after Bruce's trials with the rise of young comedians inspired by Bruce to produce more political and satirical comedy. However, Bruce himself was not granted the label of satirist because, at the time, his conversational style was "devoid of any cohesiveness" and his performances were seen as "a series of unconnected items" that could not merge together

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[194] Dorothy Kilgallen, "Cross-Examination of Dorothy Kilgallen," *The People v. Lenny Bruce: Excerpts from the Café Au Go Go Trial*, www.umkc.edu, (accessed April 4, 2007).
[195] Richard A. Kuh, "Cross-Examination of Dorothy Kilgallen."
[196] Justice John Murtagh, "People v. Bruce: Majority Opinion."

to produce any social significance.[197] His ad-libbing and improvisation did not fit the description of satire and social commentary and he was left with only the label entertainer. Bruce was viewed as "a professional humorist … whose sole duty was to make us laugh," not an artist who incorporated standup to criticize mainstream America.[198] His ultimate downfall appears to have resulted from stereotypes of standup comedy and Bruce's perfection of his own style which ultimately created an image of him as a comedian who incorporated shocking material to gain notoriety and make money, not encourage a shift in American cultural logic.

[197] Ibid.
[198] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 212.

CONCLUSION

In August of 1966, Lenny Bruce was found dead in his Hollywood home of a drug overdose. His obituary in the *New York Times* reflected both the change in American culture since the early 1960s and the mixed opinions many Americans had regarding Bruce and his comedy, declaring "whatever his significance, Lenny Bruce was controversial."[199] Dennis Stock, the author, recalled the controversy surrounding Bruce's obscenity trials, demonstrating how conflicting the discussion surrounding Bruce, obscenity, satire, and art still was in 1966.

> "His humor on the stage rarely evoked a comfortable belly laugh. It required concentration, and then often produced a wry smile and perhaps a fighting gleam in the eye. There were also spells of total confusion as Mr. Bruce rambled in a stream-of-consciousness fashion."[200]

However, almost immediately after his death, Bruce was resurrected as a brilliant satirist who was singled out for prosecution and who "the police came and harassed … in death as in life."[201] Within five years, Bruce's autobiography was updated with a forward and afterward reflecting on his cultural impact and a Broadway play about his life opened up and was later adapted into a movie.[202] It appears that all of America's hang ups about Bruce and his comedy disappeared, and by 1969, the numerous recordings of his acts were being re-released or compiled onto new albums, solidifying his mainstream acceptance.

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[199] Dennis Stock, "Lenny Bruce, Uninhibited Comic, Found Dead in Hollywood Home," *New York Times*, August 3, 1966, pg. 32.
[200] Ibid, 32.
[201] Dick Schaap, *Afterward, How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963), 237.
[202] See Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1963). See also, Julian Barry, *Lenny*, (New York, 1971).

This sudden shift in Bruce's status may have resulted from another shift in his audience. In 1966, the Baby Boomers were coming of age, forcing mainstream America to reexamine many of its values, including segregation and gender roles. Just as the youth of the 1950s sought out spaces, music, and culture that was separate from their elders, so too the Counterculture sought its own icons, heroes, and means of expression. Although he had difficulty securing shows in the 1960s because club owners did not want the police to shut down their clubs, Bruce was able to perform at some venues, and he appears to have finally found an audience that allowed him to be a more traditional comedian. At his Berkeley concert, for example, he again assumed his audience was young people, only now, Bruce was much older than them and of their parents' generation. His comedy reflected this by portraying his generation as the humorous, failing outsiders incapable of living according to the audience's standards.

> "I think that – a lot of marriages went west, you know, they split up in my generation because ladies didn't know that guys were different. [laughter] I mean different – it's very tough for chicks to realize that, although we speak the same language that you're – you can have babies – it's like, no guy cheated on his wife ever. But ladies would get hurt and wanna leave the husbands because they thought the husbands cheated, and they never did cheat because what cheating means, I know, to a lady means kissing and hugging and liking somebody. You have to at least like somebody. Guys, that doesn't enter into it. All the time, no. Ladies are one emotion and guys detach, not consciously detach, but they just do detach. Like a lady can't go through a plate glass window and go to bed with you five seconds later. [laughter] but guys can have head-on collisions with Greyhound buses [laughter] in disaster areas [laughter] everybody's laying dead on the highway. And on the way to the hospital and this guy makes a play for the nurse. [laughter]
> 'How could he do a thing at a time like that?'
> [mumbles] 'Well. I got horny.' [laughter]
> 'What?'
> 'I got hot.'
> 'How could you be hot when your foot's cut off and you're – dead?' [laughter]
> 'I don't know.'
> '*He's an animal*! [laughter] He got hot with his foot cut off!' [laughter]
> [mumbles] 'I guess I'm an animal.' [laughter]
> 'What did you get hot at?'
> 'The nurse's uniform.' [laughter]
> He's a moron, that's all, an animal. He's a – no, it's – guys detach and it has nothing to do with liking, loving. You put guys on a desert island, they'll do it to mud. [laughter] Mud. So if you caught your husband with mud – somehow you could get overseas, there. '*Mud!* [laughter] *Don't talk to me. That's all!* [laughter] You piece of shit, you leave me alone, that's all. [laughter] Go with you mud, have fun. [laughter] You want dinner, get your mud to make it for you.' [laughter] That's it – you just can't get angry at them. You can't wanna leave them for that at all. No, it's

> um – and that's just subjective, but in retrospect, I really get a kick out of that – getting divorced."[203]

Bruce applauded the audience's evolving definition of marriage and sex by analyzing the shortcomings of his generation's definition. His reminder that those he mocked were his age created the inferior image that traditional comedians used by mocking his failure to be as progressive as the audience. His irreverent language, however, alluded his desire to fit in with the audience, and this generated sympathy because Bruce's failure resulted from his age, not his values. His analysis of the status quo allowed the 1960s youth to ignore the contradiction that Bruce was of the generation they challenged, and allowed him to enter into their "community" because his ridicule coincided with their "revolution through lifestyle rather than politics" approach.[204]

Bruce conveniently fit into the 1960s youth's culture of demanding a change in American values and logic through, but not limited to, unconventional means. Beth Bailey argues that a major weapon of the Counterculture was it use of the word "fuck" to get attention from the mainstream. "Fuck" shocked the straights into listening because it "was the verbal equivalent of throwing a bomb."[205] Although it was not until the mid 1960s that Bruce regularly began incorporating profanity into his routines, his subject matter of typically private or controversial topics stirred mainstream America in much the same way. He found the humor in unfunny or serious situations and encouraged his audiences to laugh at their own absurdity. The Counterculture embraced Bruce because his humor resembled their sensibilities, pointing out the inconsistencies of segregation and fighting for "democracy" in Vietnam when the country would have democratically

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[203] Lenny Bruce, *The Berkeley Concert*, Bizarre Planet, 1969.
[204] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 15.
[205] Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 163.

elected communists. As Bruce became associated more with the 1960s youth culture, his roots in the 1950s underground culture became obscured as the 1950s increasingly came to represent everything the 1960s sought to overturn. His original place in history as another example of the discontent within the 1950s that laid the groundwork for the 1960s Counterculture was forgotten. Instead, he has been placed within a 1960s context on the basis of superficial similarities and memory.

And yet, the reality of Bruce's obscenity trials reflected the general concern of the 1960s youth culture about their rights to free speech. Just as young people got attention and possibly a rush for saying and printing "fuck," Bruce used his unconventional and conversational style to express his objections with "civility, politeness, and convention."[206] This similarity created a posthumous bond between Bruce and the Counterculture because he represented a trailblazer in popular culture who supposedly demanded his rights to free speech be respected. Whereas the Beats were already being recognized as apolitical, with no desire to change mainstream culture, Bruce's mainstream notoriety and topics of discussion created an image of him as wanting to educate Americans of their inconsistencies and break through the mass conformity of the 1950s. This made him appear ahead of his time and completely out of place with the 1950s underground, who only wanted to be left alone. As a result, Bruce and his comedy have been remembered as 1960s phenomena that sought the same goals and social change as the youth culture that embraced him.

However, this thesis has demonstrated that Bruce's comedy developed parallel with the underground cultures of hipsters, Beats, and bebop jazz. These groups voiced discontent with mainstream American culture in the 1950s and provided Bruce with an

[206] Ibid, 163.

audience. Bruce was not a single voice, expressing isolated discontent, and his humor reflects this reality. Without an audience laughing at his rants about family, morals, or segregation, Bruce would not have garnered the notoriety he did and would have faded into history unnoticed because he did nothing different or unique. Because he developed his comedy to reflect the discontent of his early audiences, Bruce was able to rise up and gain some mainstream interest and popularity. The community he built with his primary audiences may have encouraged him to assume that more Americans agreed with him, at least privately, even if publicly they promoted America's distorted logic.

As he became more nationally known, Bruce faced the challenge of maintaining the comedian-audience relationship he had established with the underground. Although he continuously altered his comedy by warning his audiences about possibly offensive bits, his refusal to abandon his underground roots ultimately alienated the mainstream. His ability to ad-lib and build routines according to audience reaction aided him in tailoring his acts towards the sensibilities of those present, but his apparent development of routines specifically created to point out the audience's stereotypes possibly appeared mean-spirited. Bruce's perfection of his conversational style did not fit Americans' definition of either standup or social commentary, and as a comic, Bruce was expected to cater to the majority, which he apparently did not, despite the reality that he was popular. His willingness to change his comedy raised the expectation that he could alter it away from the underground towards mainstream "clean" comedy, as is evidenced by his trials.

Because Bruce believed his was not "comedy," like what Bob Hope performed, and his humor was attempting to say something, Bruce refused to alter his acts because the meaning of what he said would be diminished. Although he did not necessarily

believe his routines represented art, he had no problem exploiting Americans' assumptions of art in order to continue performing. He, therefore, found himself defending his comedy as art to the courts, who were unable, or unwilling, to see the parallel between their definitions of art and what Bruce claimed to be art. Bruce's use of standup as the means to express his commentary stereotyped him as an entertainer who was expected to validate his audience, not shock or offend them. Ultimately, many factors played a role in his inability to prove his humor had social value, and therefore First Amendment protection. His improvisational comedy appeared driven by the market place, leaving his critics to assume he shocked for attention and to make money, and the history of standup as a validating form of entertainment left Bruce with few options to argue that his use of social commentary as the basis of his humor resembled art. No comedian, satirist, or artist before him resembled his image, work, or humor. This left him without any legitimate precedents during his trials, making it difficult for the courts to declare him a legitimate artist.

The complicated and ambiguous attitudes of most Americans regarding Bruce and his performances have often been overlooked or simplified by scholars. An assumption has apparently developed that Bruce's obscenity trials occurred because he challenged the status quo of the 1950s, and the years of performing sold out shows and the reality that the 1950s were not conformist has been ignored. This has left Bruce within a 1960s context and as a cultural icon of rebellion against conformity. Without diminishing either the impact Bruce's trials had on Americans' understanding of the First Amendment or his status as a cultural icon, this thesis has demonstrated that Bruce's significance really lies in the 1950s. His informal style, which would become a staple of standup comedy from

George Carlin to Jerry Seinfeld, allowed Bruce to express discontent in a new way that appeared out of place in the 1950s. However, without Bruce's performances in the 1950s, his obscenity trials would not have occurred in the 1960s, and there would be no cultural icon for the Counterculture to claim as their own. If Bruce is understood as a product of the 1950s, his achievements and creativity are even more remarkable, and his martyrdom as "a symbol of free speech" in the late 1960s, when so much of his sensibility had been embraced by the Counterculture, is even more tragic.[207]

[207] Dick Schaap, *Afterward*, In *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 238.

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