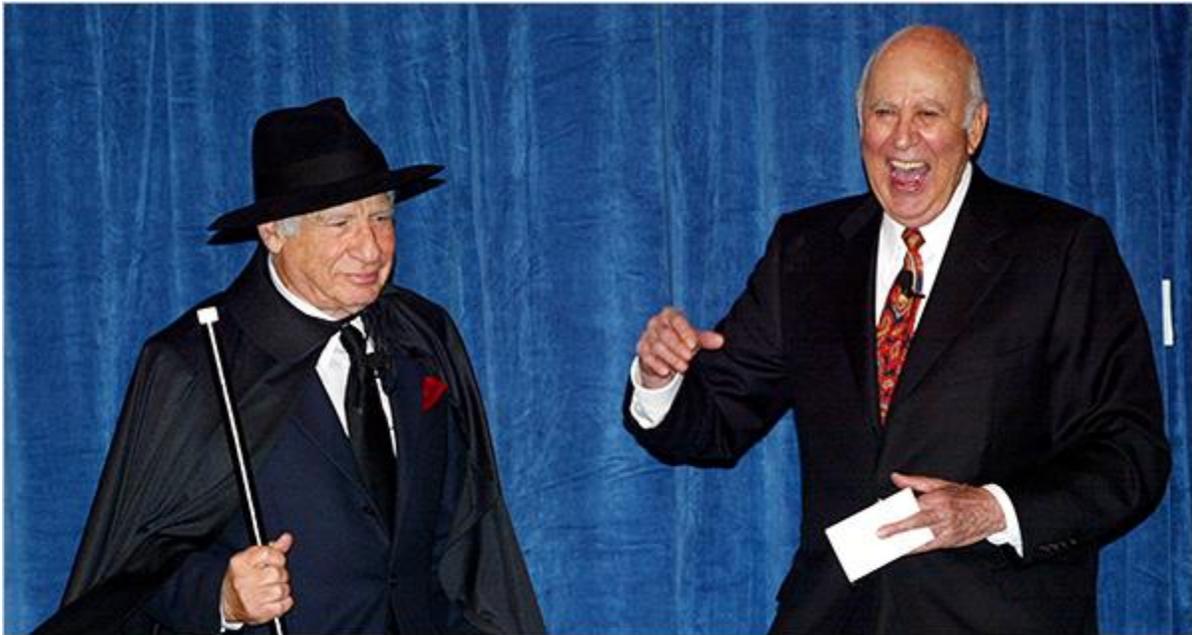


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A Shtick With a Thousand Lives

By ARI KARPEL



[MEL BROOKS](#) and [Carl Reiner](#) have been cracking each other up for nearly 60 years. The two met while working on [Sid Caesar](#)'s early television series "Your Show of Shows," when they cooked up a routine in which Mr. Reiner played an earnest, unnamed TV interviewer, and Mr. Brooks, the 2,000 Year Old Man.

In a Yiddish accent, the old guy held forth on the questionable wisdom of an absurdly long life, touching on topics including parenthood ("I have over 42,000 children — and not one comes to visit me"), [Shakespeare](#) ("He was a dreadful writer." "Every letter was cockeyed, he had the worst penmanship I ever saw in my life!") and the Black Plague ("Too many rats, not enough cats").

The shtick yielded five comedy albums, television appearances with [Ed Sullivan](#) and [Steve Allen](#) and a 1975 animated television special, all of which are included in Shout! Factory's remastered 50th anniversary four-disc reissue (three CDs and one DVD), "The 2000 Year Old Man: The Complete History," in stores Nov. 24. Mr. Brooks and Mr. Reiner even won a Grammy in 1999 for the fifth album, "The 2000 Year Old Man in the Year 2000." Their wry satire of pop culture influenced a generation of comedians while it helped make Jewish humor American humor.

There are hints in the albums of their own later work, like Mr. Brooks's bits on the Spanish Inquisition in his 1981 movie "History of the World: Part One."

Of course Mr. Brooks, 83, and Mr. Reiner, 87, have had long, rich, diverse careers beyond "The 2000 Year Old Man." Mr. Brooks wrote, directed and starred in movies like "High Anxiety," "Blazing Saddles" and "Silent Movie," created the TV series "Get Smart" with [Buck Henry](#) and turned two of his movies, "The Producers" and "Young Frankenstein," into Broadway musicals. Mr. Reiner created "The [Dick Van Dyke](#) Show," directed the movies "Oh, God," "The Jerk" and "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid," and has published eight books.

But it's their friendship — and the bond of the 2,000 Year Old Man routine — that has helped sustain the two men through the bad times (Mr. Brooks' wife, the actress [Anne Bancroft](#), star of "The Graduate," died in 2005; Mr. Reiner's wife, Estelle, best known for her one line in "When Harry Met Sally" — "I'll have what she's having" — died in October 2008) as well as the good. (See career highlights above.) And they don't seem to be slowing down.

Mr. Brooks produces and voices a character on "Spaceballs," an animated series based on his 1987 movie, and next month, when Fox releases nine of his movies in a BluRay collection, he will receive the [Kennedy Center](#) Honors; Mr. Reiner put out two books this year, "Just Desserts: A Novelletah" and a children's book, "Tell Me a Scary Story... But Not Too Scary!"

Ari Karpel sat down with them last month in Mr. Reiner's Beverly Hills home, occasionally getting in a question as the two men furiously riffed about the genesis of "The 2000 Year Old Man," [Cary Grant](#)'s cheapness and the keys to a long friendship. (Sympatico wives and a love of spy movies play a part.) These are excerpts from the conversation.

Q. How did you first come up with "The 2000 Year Old Man"?

MEL BROOKS At the beginning it was pure made-up craziness and joy, and there was no thought of anybody else hearing it except maybe a couple of dear friends at a party.

CARL REINER It was to pep up a room. We started on "Your Show of Shows," and sometimes there would be a lull [in the writers' room]. I always knew if I threw a question to Mel he could come up with something.

BROOKS We had fun.

REINER I remember the first question I asked him. It was because I had seen a program called "We the People Speak," early television. [He puts on an announcer voice] "'We the People Speak.' Here's a man who was in Stalin's toilet, heard Stalin say, 'I'm going to blow up the world.'" I came in, I said this is good for a sketch. No one else thought so, but I turned to Mel and I said, "Here's a man who was actually seen at the crucifixion 2,000 years ago," and his first words were "Oh, boy." [He sighs.] We all fell over laughing. I said, "You knew Jesus?" "Yeah," he said "Thin lad, wore sandals, long hair, walked around with 11 other guys. Always came into the store, never bought anything. Always asked for water." Those were the first words, and then for the next hour or two I kept asking him questions, and he never stopped killing us.

BROOKS It was all ad-libbed, and nothing was ever talked about before we did it. We didn't write anything, we didn't think about anything. Whatever was kinetic, whatever was chemical, we did it.

REINER [We said] we can't do it for anybody but Jews and non-anti-Semitic friends. The Eastern European Jewish accent Mel did was persona non grata in 1950. The war had been over for five years, the Jews had been maligned enough.

BROOKS Jews were still changing their names to get jobs.

REINER He's Melvyn Kaminsky!

BROOKS So a Jewish accent was not always a good thing.

REINER We did it out here in Los Angeles at what you would call a Class A party. One by one people came over to us. [George Burns](#) came by with a cigar and said, "Is there an album?" I said no. He said, "Well, you better put it on an album, or I'm going to steal it."

BROOKS That's true, he said he was going to steal it.

REINER Edward G. Robinson, who was there, said: "Write a play. I want to do it on Broadway." And the one who came up to us and really made sense was Steve Allen. He said you have to make an album.

BROOKS I said, "I don't want to make a record because if I don't like it, then they have control." And he said, "We'll put it in the contract: if you don't like it you can burn it, tear it —

REINER — expunge it, whatever you want, but it's yours." He rented a studio, and he didn't want to be a partner of it. He's just one of these guys who wants to promote comedians, get the world to laugh. We did 2 hours, cut it down to 47 minutes. Mel was saying, "You know, it's only for Jews." And then we had this whole thing where we slowly got news back of who was listening to it. I gave Cary Grant an album. He came back one day and he said [with British accent], "Can I have a dozen?" He was a schnorrer, by the way. He used to have his laundry done at MGM while he was working at Universal.

BROOKS We don't know if that's true!

REINER It is true! But when he went to Fabergé [Grant became a creative consultant and spokesman for the cosmetics brand in 1967], it all changed. He became very giving after that. But —

BROOKS You mean he was taking, taking, taking?

REINER He was a poor guy, he was a busker. Anyway, he said, "I need a dozen to take to England." And I said: "Why do you need 12 of them? You're going to play it in London?" "Yes,

they speak English there.” He came back. He said, “She loved it.” Who? “The Queen Mother.” “You took it to Buckingham Palace?” “Yes.” I said, “Well there’s the biggest shiksa in the world, we must be all right.”

BROOKS It was more fun when there was no record in the offing, when it was just titillating ourselves and our friends.

REINER Well, you must admit that the biggest fun was when that first check came and you said, “We got paid for this?” And by the way, we did do it in places like “The Ed Sullivan Show” and it was never as good because Mel could never remember what he said, and for him to learn when you do seven minutes, you can’t ad lib for seven minutes, it may not work sometimes. You need a half-hour to get a good seven minutes.

BROOKS I overdid everything.

REINER When he’s free, when he’s in panic, he’s perfect. I learned a long time ago that if you can corner a genius comedy brain in panic, you’re going to get something extraordinary because they fight — they don’t want to die. And he’s a genius. [He notices that Mr. Brooks is twiddling his thumbs.] Now watch this. Who was the first one to twiddle his thumbs?

BROOKS Murray.

REINER Murray? [He laughs.]

BROOKS Murray, the cave man.

REINER What made him twiddle his thumbs?

BROOKS He couldn’t go on the hunt. He had hurt his foot very badly the day before, a musk oxen had hurt his foot the day before, so he was in the thumb — he was in the cave, twiddling his thumbs. He was the first one to betray this nervous disorder, thumb twiddling. And when we all came back, we noticed it. We said, “Murray, kung voo roch mush?” We talked in a different language.

REINER Yes, I see.

BROOKS Cave talk [for] “Why the hell are you twiddling your thumbs?”

Q. Did you ever feel constrained as the straight man, Carl?

REINER No, no, no, no.

BROOKS He does get plenty of laughs. He breaks me up all the time, and it’s his earnestness.

Q. Sixty years later it seems you see a lot of each other now.

REINER Yeah, we got that big screen [gestures to incredibly large flat-screen monitor] to look at television.

Q. So you come here, Mel, and you watch TV together?

BROOKS Almost every night. He's got a wonderful housekeeper-cook and we decide on a menu and a movie.

Q. What did you watch most recently?

BROOKS We watched last night "The Peacemaker." With [Nicole Kidman](#) and, come on. [He gestures to Mr. Reiner.]

REINER [George Clooney](#).

BROOKS Right. It was two and a half stars at the most. Good performances, very silly, you know.

REINER We look for movies with the line "Secure the perimeter."

BROOKS Yeah, we like movies that say, "Secure the perimeter" and/or "You better get some rest."

REINER "Lock all doors!"

BROOKS "I want a five-block seal!"

Q. What's the key to 60 years of friendship?

REINER Our wives liked each other.

BROOKS Carl, you're absolutely right. We all were just in perfect harmony. We liked the same kinds of things.

REINER Except food. He can't eat onions.

Editor's Note: This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

An article on Sunday about the friendship between Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner misstated a quote by Cary Grant. He played an album for the Queen Mother, not the Queen of England.