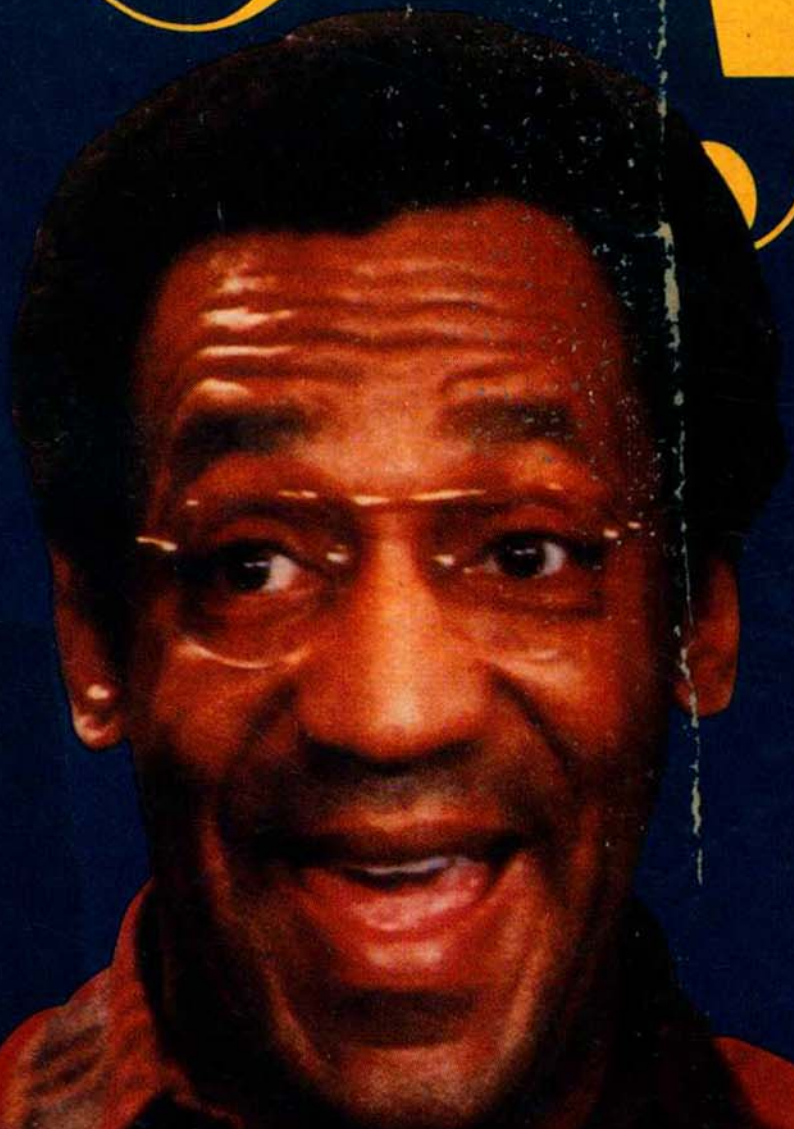


A RARE, REVEALING LOOK AT
AMERICA'S #1 ENTERTAINMENT LEGEND!

COSBY



Ronald L. Smith

Includes 16 pages of wonderful photos
SELECTED BY THE LITERARY GUILD

COSBY

Ronald L. Smith

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS/NEW YORK

St. Martin's Press titles are available at quantity discounts for sales promotions, premiums or fund raising. Special books or book excerpts can also be created to fit specific needs. For information write to special sales manager, St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

COSBY

Copyright © 1986 by Ronald L. Smith

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-25118

ISBN: 0-312-90670-6 Can. ISBN: 0-312-90671-4

Printed in the United States of America

First St. Martin's Press mass market edition/February 1987

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter

1

“**T**he only thing I had to give him,” his mother said, “was plenty of love, and oh, dear God, I gave him all I had. But success comes from within, and Bill was determined to be something.”

Born to Anna and William Cosby on July 12, 1937, William Henry Cosby, Jr., arrived at three A.M., just to make sure he had everyone's attention.

He lived in Germantown, a poor district in North Philadelphia. The people who lived there, like the Cosby family, sometimes called it “the Jungle.” At first, William Cosby, Sr., made a fairly decent living as a welder, and his family lived comfortably on Beechwood Street. But with an expanding family, ever more pressure, and no way out of long sweaty days and exhausted nights, the elder Cosby began to drink more. The family was washed down to Steward Street and less pleasant accommodations.

There was no bathtub in the house. Instead there was a half-size metal tub that had to be hoisted atop the stove and heated, then lugged back down for bathing. Faced with an arduous procedure like that, young Cos figured there had to be an easier way out. On the nightclub stage, Cosby would talk about bathing in the toilet instead. Of course, he'd warm up the water first—by dumping his brother in it.

As William Cosby, Sr., became more of an absentee father, the family drifted still deeper into the Jungle, ending up in a

first-floor apartment at 919A Parish Place in the Richard Allen Homes, a series of squat buildings that housed the poor. The people who lived in them called the place by a less fancy name: "the projects." The homes were among the first experiments in such housing for the poor in Philly. The idea was to file the poor away in neat boxes, as many to a room as they could stand.

Some kids in the projects had a tough time making it home, not because of crime, but because the barracks all looked alike. Every building was the same dirty beige with a stripe of red brick along the first floor. But as Bill remembered it, as bad as the projects were, they could be appreciated as an almost "upper-class place in a lower-class district."

He grew up with the sound of the trains roaring by night and day, shaking the hollow walls and flooring of the Cosby home. "There was a railroad bridge and when Mother would hang clothes the trains would go by and dirty them. But it wasn't a life of poverty. We always had plenty of hot water and heat."

Three more children arrived, one of them an epileptic, and the Cosby household was soon a crowded one. Bill and his young brother James slept in the same bed. He and James shared many of the childhood pranks and jokes that would later turn up in Bill's monologues, from giggling late at night to feuding over who'd roll over on the cold spot when the younger boy wet the bed.

Bill had less time to share with his parents. His mother had to work as a cleaning lady. By the time he was able to say "Dad," he was hardly able to find him anymore.

Squeezed with wife and kids into the cramped quarters at the Richard Allen Homes, William Cosby, Sr., sought a way out. He found it by joining the navy. He also found something else to keep himself out of the house: booze. For young Bill, who thought of his father as "the Giant," and who would later create brilliant humor about the frightening presence of a grumbling parental behemoth, real life was more nightmare than fairytale.

Cos told the story in nightclubs of how he and his brother would wait for their father to come home. He "would go out and

really booze it up, 'cause my mother'd give him an allowance of about five dollars and he'd go down to the tavern . . . he'd come home around nine o'clock really loaded." Breathing heavily, struggling with his clothes, he'd drop his pants and the boys would hear the sound of coins.

"Clink! The Giant . . . has money!" And they'd sneak into his room and steal it.

It made a suspenseful story, filled with conspiratorial whispers, the wide-eyed look of fear at being caught, and the glee in counting out eighty-five cents. In the routine, it was even funny when the Giant woke up and said, "Fee, fi, fo, fum, who stole my dough! Was it the kids? I'll beat the kids!" Cosby's mom cried, "Leave the children alone." The Giant stormed, "Why, you in it with them?" She said, "Yes, I get twenty percent."

Bill Cosby's story, told years later in a nightclub, is more than selective amnesia. It's a magical transformation of pain into laughter. For one thing, Bill's dad rarely came home with any money left over from his nights shooting darts and drinking at the bar. Even on payday, there was somehow no money.

Bill's father didn't *threaten* to beat the kids, but, when his wife pressed too hard for spending money, he didn't bother to threaten. He hit.

A more accurate bedtime scene would show a young, frightened Cos listening with mounting fear and confusion to the strained and pleading female voice and the loud rumbling male voice coming from the other room.

"But Bill, you got paid today!"

"Take this, because that's all I have."

"But Bill—"

"Well, this is all I have, so don't ask me for anymore."

Some nights the loud voices would subside. But other nights, Bill's mom tried desperately to get a share of the paycheck, for the rent, for food, for the kids. And there was the sudden sound of sickening violence, followed by the softer sound of sobbing. Too young to understand and too old to ever forgive, Bill could do

nothing about these scenes of anger and tears except hope for the Giant to stay away a little longer the next time he disappeared.

Who was this drunk, violent man named *Bill Cosby*? For the other Bill Cosby in the house, this grown-up image was a source of confusion and pain. *Father*. "The word still spells disappointment to my brothers and me."

Anna Cosby couldn't make it without taking matters into her own hands. With her husband disappearing more and more, she ended up working twelve-hour days cleaning other people's homes, and it still wasn't enough. "Many's the time I saw her come home from work exhausted and hungry and give her supper to one of my brothers who was still hungry after he'd eaten his own."

The family ended up on relief. "We needed those checks on the fifteenth and thirtieth," Cos adds. The Cosby boys tried to make things easier for their mom, but inevitably there would be squabbles, homework problems, or maybe just a game of indoor basketball that left a lamp broken. When there was trouble, poor Mrs. Cosby couldn't help but burst into tears.

"Her tears alone would shake us up," Bill recalls. "No spankings. No beatings. She'd start crying and you'd start crying."

In the midst of the frustration and heartache, Cos couldn't quite understand what was happening. His father was always gone, but now even his brother James was disappearing. For long periods the boy was gone, and when he'd come back, he'd be sick. Little James was only two years younger than Bill, the only other male in the household Bill could play with and count on.

At six, James died of rheumatic fever. The family tragedy only worsened the situation at the house. A few more years, and the Giant was gone for good. He had simply stepped out, abandoned his home and family, and left it to William Henry Cosby, Jr., to take his place.

"My first job," Bill recalled, "was to make a shoeshine box out of orange crates. Then go out and buy shoe polish and washrags and go downtown and shine shoes. When I was eleven, I worked

summer vacation at a grocery store. Hauling boxes and stuff, from six in the morning until six at night, nine on Saturday nights. For eight dollars a week. That was 1948."

Not yet into his teens, Cos had three jobs in the fall. First, he had to make money for the family, getting up at sunrise to sell fruit over on Marshall Street, or shining shoes. Then he had school. And then he had to take care of his younger brothers Russell and Robert till his mom came home. He learned to deal with all their familiar childhood arguments, ranging from who got the extra piece of cake left over from last night to when it was time to do homework.

"He kept us in line and whipped us when we got out of line," Russell remembers.

Sometimes it was part of Bill's responsibility to make breakfast. He evidently inherited some skill from his father, who could work wonders with whatever leftovers were lying around—but in the case of the son, there was the unique Cos touch to it. He liked to put food coloring into everything, something his dad never tried in the navy.

"I liked purple waffles, green, orange, red waffles. I loved them and I couldn't understand why my mother never dug them. Nobody seemed to want to eat them. But food coloring is cool. Take scrambled eggs. Put some food coloring in, scramble 'em up, cook 'em, and they look like green or blue sponges."

It was one thing not to eat one of Cos's masterpieces. But not to help clean up? That was something else again. Russell recalls: "I tried to be smart one day when my little brother came out and said, 'Bill wants you to come in and wash the dishes.' I was with a couple of my friends and was going to be real brave and so I said, 'If Bill wants me tell him to come out here and get me.' And he did. It was in the summertime and he put me in this room with no fan, with the windows closed, and he closed the door, and that was my punishment."

Russell would grow into a 250-pound man, and he was big for

his age even in childhood, but he never tried to push around his older brother Bill: "I never tried to lick him. . . . I had that father respect for him."

When Cos went to the Mary Channing Wister Elementary School, Bill found himself in the midst of some pretty confusing adults, but at least none of them were as threatening—or as disappointing—as his father. School was weird, though. A curious kid, Cos wondered why, when he was wide awake at eleven in the morning, the teacher would clap her hands and announce that everybody had to go take a nap. He also wondered why the teacher had to know whether he was going to the bathroom for a "number one" or a "number two."

School was a place not to take too seriously, and Cos didn't. Later on, Cosby would look back at ghetto schools and remember them as places of "trouble and turmoil, where the teachers look on it as a steppingstone to somewhere else and nobody really cares and the kids look up to the wrong people." But at the time Cos was doing his best to make it as painless as possible, so there'd be more time for play.

Sometimes Cos would con his mom and get to take the day off pretending he was sick. He found that a little charm could go a long way. "You start out at about three or four conning your mother out of a cookie. You know that she'll say no the first time you ask, but you know that if you can get her laughing you can get around her." Soon he was able to con the teachers and, with a little joking around, con his classmates too.

Nicknamed "Shorty," shy little Cos "got to feeling that as long as people were laughing, they were my friends. So to get myself across and to be an important person, I made them laugh. Through humor I gained acceptance."

Some of the humor came from the unfailing spirits of his mother. Sometimes she would share the humor by spending an hour or two reading funny stories about mischievous boys living down in Missouri.

"My mother used to read Mark Twain to us," Bill remembers.

"She scared us half to death with those kids going down into that cave."

To interviewers, who would often ask him about his comic influences, he'd simply say, "Read Twain." He was confident that they would learn something if they did, and even more confident that they hadn't read Twain in the first place.

With young Bill helping his mom to raise baby James, baby Russell, and baby Robert, he probably shared a laugh with her when Anna Cosby would read a passage from a book like *Pudd'n-head Wilson*, where Mark Twain would describe, in vivid picture-perfect detail, life with a newborn babe. Imagine Cosby delivering Twain's lines:

"The baby would claw anybody who came within reach of his nails and pound anybody he could reach with his rattle. He would scream for water until he got it, and then throw cup and all on the floor and scream for more. . . . He was allowed to eat anything he wanted, particularly things that would give him a stomach-ache."

As Langston Hughes wrote, "Mark Twain, in his presentation of Negroes as human beings, stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his times."

But in the public schools of Bill Cosby's childhood, the idea of Negroes as human beings was a novelty. Few teachers sought to instill pride in their black students. However, Cosby remembered one of his teachers, Mrs. McKinney, being very agitated one day. The children at the racially mixed school he attended had just come back from assembly, where they had sung, in about ten different keys, a bunch of songs starting with "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Mrs. McKinney asked the kids if they knew what the lyrics to one of the songs was all about—the one that was called "Old Black Joe."

"She said we were never, ever to sing that song again. She said none of us had any business singing that song. And it brought an awareness to us, because we were just little children and didn't think about what we were singing. But we were absorbing something from that song which said we were second-class citizens."

Cos was learning fast to separate the truth and the lies, and learning even faster how to make his own lies pass for truth. But sometimes he could still get taken in by those adults. Like Mom. Talking about fright and bewilderment onstage, Cos did a riff about the time he was playing with his navel.

"My mother said, 'All right, keep playin' with your navel, pretty soon you're gonna break it wide open and the air's gonna come right out of your body, you'll fly around the room backwards for thirty seconds, land and be flat as a piece of paper, nothin' but your little eyes buggin' out.' "

Cos was so shaken he used to carry Band-Aids in case he had an accident.

Cosby's feelings towards adults in general, and teachers in particular, might best be summed up in a few lines from one of the Twain books his mom read to him. Huckleberry Finn talks about prissy Miss Watson:

"Miss Watson would say, 'Don't put your feet up . . . don't scrunch like that . . . don't stretch . . . set up straight . . . why don't you behave?' Then she told me all about the 'bad place' and I said I wished I was there."

At the Wister School, Cos finally found a teacher who wasn't the typical "Miss Watson." Her name was Miss Mary Forchic. She did her job seriously and joyfully. She knew that the little kids had big problems. They were often hungry, they had to go about in torn clothes and flapping-soled shoes. And they were lost. Lost among all the other kids at school, lost in a crowd of other brothers and sisters at home. And when these little kids were overlooked by adults who considered themselves too big and powerful to give them time or attention, they were not only lost—they were alone.

Miss Forchic's class was for the "unreachable and unteachable" kids, but she felt many of their problems came from their own sense of smallness, helplessness, and lack of self-worth. They needed desperately to have a sense of pride. The first thing she used to do when she set up a classroom was to spread the tables around

as much as possible, so each child could have "his own space" and a little breathing room.

Most public school teachers were biding their time, waiting for something better, or simply acting like paid baby-sitters. They weren't about to put in any extra effort to reach out and risk getting kicked by some rowdy brat, or getting yelled at by some obstinate, angry parent who didn't care to be hassled. But Miss Forchic gave her time, and her money. She offered prizes of toys, treated some kids to after-school snacks at the local luncheonette. In order to meet with parents, she would invite herself over after dinner, bringing something for the whole family—dessert.

Cos remembered the time she gave him a special treat. She took him to the movies, giving him a chance to get out of the neighborhood for the first time and see a gaudier, dreamier district of town: "I was so happy to be downtown. After the movie, my teacher took me to dinner and then she rode me home in a taxicab. This was a big thing because in my neighborhood if you rode in a taxicab something bad or something wonderful had happened to you."

"Every child is interested in something," she once said. "The teacher's job is to find out what that something is. If it's baseball or football, for example, you can build math around that." If a kid wanted to know how to compute his batting average, he went to Miss Forchic.

When a child turned in a hastily scrawled little homework assignment, she didn't scream or yell. She said "I'll accept this—if you tell me it's the best you can do." And her techniques for teaching, her dedication and inspiration, impressed Cos enough to make him think about becoming a teacher—a thought traitorously abhorrent to the minds of most kids doing time in elementary prison.

Bill got his first taste of show business in Miss Forchic's class. It wasn't just the way he would cut up for the other kids. Doing that, he'd just get his teacher annoyed enough to warn, "In this

classroom, there is one comedian and it is I. If you want to be one, grow up, get your own stage, and get paid for it."

The teacher figured that if Bill was such a natural, why not channel that talent the right way? Bill turned up in such immortal class plays as *Tom Tit Tot* and *King Koko from Kookoo Island*. He loved to perform, but he was still a shy boy needing to be drawn out: "If somebody would pick me for the play I would go ahead and do it, but if they said 'We want a volunteer' I never volunteered."

In 1972, Bill was reunited with his favorite teacher, now the retired Mrs. Paul Nagle of Washington, D.C. At a convention of the American Association of School Administrators, she received an award for her many years of teaching. In an interview for the *NEA Journal*, she shared her advice for teachers, advice that Cos seems to have used in reaching a new generation of kids:

"Learn understatement," she said. "Talk less. Speak quietly. Listen to the children . . . never belittle anything the child says or embarrass him in front of his peers. Instead, help each student to shine in his group."

Cos began to shine a little. Miss Forchic did write on his sixth-grade report card, "He would rather be a clown than a student and feels it is his mission to amuse his classmates in and out of school," but she also noted he was "a boy's boy, an all-around fellow, and he should grow up to do great things."

But how was he supposed to do that, growing up in one of the ghettos of Philadelphia?

Chapter

2

Cosby has tended to sidestep detailed questions about his childhood. Even with close friends, many aspects are “too painful to even think about.” Instead, he’s created a mythical childhood of laughter with his monologues.

Once, asked if his childhood was a happy one, he answered “It will be, onstage.”

Bill’s youngest brother Robert put it this way: “Bill could turn painful situations around and make them funny. You laughed to keep from crying.”

Christmas was the worst time of the year. It taxed even Cosby’s ability to conquer misery with mirth. The stores were swollen with glittering toys, and kids talked about it with narcotic obsession, figuring up the take. In school, Christmas stories and songs painted fantasy pictures of mommy and daddy and the kids having a feast of a dinner and dozens of gaily wrapped presents to give and get.

Some ghetto families risked it all around Christmastime, scrimping and saving to chisel a little piece of that perfect Christmas ice sculpture. But at the Cosby house, with three growing boys, an absentee father, and a mother struggling to keep her family in the projects, some years there was hardly even wishful thinking. The boys knew better than to ask.

At school the teacher would ask if the kids were hanging their

stockings on the fireplace. Well, Cos had no fireplace, of course. "We didn't have enough socks for our feet let alone any spare ones to hang."

Christmas was the season when want and need were felt more sharply than ever in the midst of plenty and greed. Only numbing December winds could put a freeze on the feeling of helplessness and rage. It was up to Bill to do something about the emptiness at the Cosby house.

"I wanted to cheer everybody up," Cos remembers. Since they couldn't afford a Christmas tree, "I took an orange crate and painted it with watercolors. We had a little Santa that lit up and I put that on top."

Mrs. Cosby had been working hard all day, as usual. When she got home, there in the corner of the bare apartment was the little painted crate, and the Santa Claus plugged in, the one red light in it throwing off a small reddish glow.

"When my mother saw it—about nine P.M. on Christmas Eve—she put on her coat and went out. She must have borrowed money from the neighbors, but she came back with a kind of scrawny Christmas tree, and the next morning we all had a few presents."

For decades thereafter Christmas would remain one of the most important holidays at the Cosby home, and Bill would try every way possible to avoid nightclub or TV commitments that would keep him away. When Cosby's kids were small, and the family was living in Beverly Hills, the center of attention in the living room was a giant tree, some eighteen feet high, with more presents than its huge, fluffy green branches could hide. It beat out the displays of most of the neighbors, although the tree of silent film comic Harold Lloyd was something special. It was a foot shorter than Cosby's, but Lloyd kept it up—and fully decorated—all year long.

Discussing Christmas now, Cosby's wife Camille says, "I am inclined to give [the children] many gifts because I was given many gifts as a child. Bill is inclined to give them less. He feels that other

things are more important. That's probably because he never really celebrated Christmas in that way, because of the circumstances."

What was important was to make every gift meaningful. Once Bill cried because his mom had given him money instead of a real gift. It was just paper to him.

In his adult life, sometimes the simplest gifts have given him the greatest joy. One year, his young daughter Ensa gave him a pair of tennis sweatbands. "He loved it," Camille recalled, "because he knew she had thought 'My daddy plays tennis and likes these . . .'"

As a child, Cos was especially sensitive to gag gifts, or presents that could have been given to anyone. He believed a gift showed how much one person knows about the other, and how much that person cares.

And then there was the black-white problem. Cos remembered the time at Fitz-Simons Junior High when his racially mixed class was celebrating Christmas. As he's often said, he was propelled toward white middle-class values. The radio stars were white, the movie stars were white, and the culture was white. For Christmas, the kids were told to bring in holiday records. One white kid brought a Bing Crosby album. One black girl brought a Mahalia Jackson record.

The class seemed to enjoy Bing Crosby and his "traditional" sound of Christmas. But when the gospel style of Mahalia Jackson was heard, some of the kids giggled, and some of the black kids felt shame. Black wasn't beautiful then, not to see and not to listen to.

Assimilation was as much a battle for Bill as it was for kids of other minority groups. Bill's generation of blacks wanted to be like their radio and movie heroes, and developed the all-American way of talking and walking. Accents, ethnic foods, unusual styles of music were frowned upon. Cosby remembered being embarrassed by his grandparents' accents, where a word like *gentlemen* came out a drawling *jemmen*. Ethnic accents were funny, the kind of thing you'd hear on Fred Allen's radio sketches for "Allen's Alley."

For his junior high friends, Cos would imitate some of the

radio comedians, doing a pretty fair squealing Jerry Lewis, and a blustery Senator Claghorn. Radio was a source of wonder for Cos. He was impressed with the way storytellers spun their tales, with the different sound effects and dialects, with shows that had the power to enthrall just with a few vivid lines of dialogue. He loved "Suspense," and "Inner Sanctum," and "Lights Out."

The monsters were special fun. For kids scared by adults and treated like "little monsters," there was a special bond with creatures like Frankenstein's—awkward, ungainly beings who seemed to cause harm no matter what their intentions, and who really only wanted a friend. Their rampages of frustration appeared only natural to the child's mind. They were just tantrums.

In the ghetto real-life crime and fear could be distorted, confronted, and conquered when the villain was something like "The Chicken Heart," the amazing, constantly growing load of pulsating flesh that, in a "Lights Out" radio show episode, engulfed the world and became a vivid memory for Cos. He imitated the show for his friends, adding the sound effects, building up the terror, and then blowing it apart with laugh-making excess. Later, on stage, he went through the process all over again, describing how he listened to the show and got so scared he threw Jell-O all over the floor so the monster would slip if he came through the door.

Hanging out at the apartment of one of the kids who was lucky enough to have a TV set, Cosby saw the comedians up close. He could do their moves, and make funny faces. He used to watch Sid Caesar and Carl Reiner performing on *Your Show of Shows*, and the images stayed with him into the night. "I used to dream of being Caesar's second banana," he recalled.

TV in the early fifties was peopled with friendly comics, stars like Jack Benny, George Gobel, Gertrude Berg, George Burns, and Sam Levenson. Levenson was a precursor to Bill Cosby, a guy who simply came out and told anecdotes about his friends and his childhood. Once a teacher of Spanish in Brooklyn public schools, Levenson had joked with his students and prefaced presentations