

BOOK

Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life

AUTHOR

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SYNOPSIS [FROM THE COVER]

"Martin illuminates the sacrifice, discipline, and originality that made him an icon and informs his work to this day. To be this good, to perform so frequently, was isolating and lonely. It took Martin decades to reconnect with his parents and sister, and he tells that story with great tenderness. Martin also paints a portrait of his times – the era of free love and protests against the war in Vietnam, the heady irreverence of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour in the late sixties, and the transformative new voice of Saturday Night Live in the seventies."

"Enjoyment while performing was rare – enjoyment would have been an indulgent loss of focus that comedy cannot afford. After the shows, however, I experienced long hours of elation or misery depending on how the show went, because doing comedy alone onstage is the ego's last stand."

"The comedian's slang for a successful show is "I murdered them," which I'm sure came about because you finally realize that the audience is capable of murdering you."

"I was seeking comic originality, and fame fell on me as a by-product. The course was more plodding than heroic: I did not strive valiantly against doubters but took incremental steps studded with a few intuitive leaps. I was not naturally talented – I didn't sing, dance, or act – though working around that minor detail made me inventive. I was not self-destructive, though I almost destroyed myself. In the end, I turned away from stand-up with a tired swivel of my head and never looked back, until now."

"I had to be in at least one performers' union, and the musicians' was the cheapest. Sylvia had been told that if she didn't hire a union worker, pronto, the place would be shut down."

"Jokes are funniest when played upon oneself."

"Having cut myself off from him, and by association the rest of the family, I was incurring psychological debts that would come due years later in the guise of romantic misconceptions and a wrong-headed quest for solitude. I have heard it said that a complicated childhood can lead to a life in the arts. I tell you this story of my father and me to let you know I am qualified to be a comedian."

"On my first day of school, the student body was called together for an assembly, and this was when I saw the face of God. The Don Wash Auditorium seated fifteen hundred people, and its interior narrowed like a funnel to focus all eyes on its polished hardwood stage. The proscenium was framed by heavy velvet curtains, and the acoustics were – and still are – brilliant and sharp, making microphones unnecessary. I sat in the audience, looking up at the stage, surrounded by high-energy, adolescent

chatter."

"The house lights dimmed dramatically, and when the crisp ice-blue spotlight illuminated center stage in anticipation of parting curtains and grand entrances, I knew I wanted to be up there rather than down here."

"Though published in 1943, this statement contains an enduring truth. All entertainment is or is about to become old-fashioned. There is room, he implies, for something new."

"But there was a problem. At age eighteen, I had absolutely no gifts. I could not sing or dance, and the only acting I did was really just shouting. Thankfully, perseverance is a great substitute for talent."

"Despite a lack of natural ability, I did have the one element necessary to all early creativity: naïveté, that fabulous quality that keeps you from knowing just how unsuited you are for what you are about to do."

"The Bird Cage was the first place where I was able to work steadily on my magic act, six minutes at a time, four times a day, five on Sunday, for three years."

"Instead, she suggested that I read W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. *The Razor's Edge* is a book about a quest for knowledge. Universal, final, unquestionable knowledge."

"My act was eclectic, and it took ten more years for me to make sense of it. However, the opportunity to perform four and five times a day gave me confidence and poise. Even though my material had few distinguishing features, the repetition made me lose my amateur rattle."

"Even though the idea of doing comedy had sounded risky when I compared it to the safety of doing trick after trick, I wanted, needed, to be called a comedian. I discovered it was not magic I was interested in but performing in general."

"To implement the new concept called originality that I had been first introduced to in Showmanship for Magicians, and was now presenting itself again in my classes in literature, poetry, and philosophy, I would have to write everything in the act myself. Any line or idea with even a vague feeling of familiarity or provenance had to be expunged. There could be nothing that made the audience feel they weren't seeing something utterly new."

"Later, I developed a few defensive lines to use against the unruly: "Oh, I remember when I had my first beer," and if that didn't cool them off, I would use a psychological trick. I would lower my voice and continue with my act, talking almost inaudibly. The audience couldn't hear the show, and they would shut the heckler up on their own."

"In college, influenced by Jack Douglas's book *My Brother Was an Only Child* and Mason Williams's *The Mason Williams Reading Matter*, I had composed, as a defiant alternative to coherent essay writing, some goofy one-paragraph stories with such titles as "The Day the Dopes Came Over," "What to Say When the Ducks Show Up," and "Cruel Shoes."

"Pete Seeger strummed his banjo not five feet from me. Around the calfskin head of Pete's banjo was written in ink, THIS MACHINE SURROUNDS HATE AND FORCES IT TO SURRENDER (an allusion to Woody Guthrie's earlier guitar slogan, THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS)."

"What if writing comedy was a dead end because one day everything would have been done and we writers would just run out of stuff? I assuaged myself with my own homegrown homily: Comedy is a distortion of what is happening, and there will always be something happening."

"IN A COLLEGE PSYCHOLOGY CLASS, I had read a treatise on comedy explaining that a laugh was formed when the storyteller created tension, then, with the punch line, released it."

"Now that I had assigned myself to an act without jokes, I gave myself a rule. Never let them know I was bombing: This is funny, you just haven't gotten it yet. If I wasn't offering punch lines, I'd never be standing there with egg on my face. It was essential that I never show doubt about what I was doing. I would move through my act without pausing for the laugh, as though everything were an aside. Eventually, I thought, the laughs would be playing catch-up to what I was doing. Everything would be either delivered in passing, or the opposite, an elaborate presentation that climaxed in pointlessness. Another rule was to make the audience believe that I thought I was fantastic, that my confidence could not be shattered. They had to believe that I didn't care if they laughed at all, and that this act was going on with or without them."

"On The Merv Griffin Show I decided to use it for panel, meaning I would sit with Merv and pretend it was just chat. I began: "I just bought a new car. A '65 Greyhound bus." Merv, friendly as ever, interrupted and said, "Now, why on earth would you buy a Greyhound bus?" I had no prepared answer; I just stared at him. I thought, "Oh my God, because it's a comedy routine." And the bit was dead. Johnny, on the other hand, was the comedian's friend. He waited; he gave you your timing. He lay back and stepped in like Ali, not to knock you out but to set you up. He struggled with you, too, and sometimes saved you."

"I continued closing the show by performing outside, which had an auxiliary effect of emptying out the house so the second show could begin. One night at the Exit/In I took the crowd down the street to a McDonald's and ordered three hundred hamburgers to go, then quickly changed it to one bag of fries. Another night, I took them to a club across the street and we watched another act. I was a new-enough performer that there was no overblown celebrity worship, which meant I could do the show and carouse in the streets, uninterrupted by ill-timed requests for autographs or photos."

"I MOVED TO ASPEN, COLORADO, to be closer to my pals Bill McEuen and the Dirt Band. It was there, on the night of October 11, 1975, that I turned on the TV and watched the premier episode of Saturday Night Live. "Fuck," I thought, "they did it." The new comedy had been brought to the airwaves in New York by people I didn't know, and they were incredibly good at it, too. The show was a heavy blow to my inner belief that I alone was leading the cavalry and carrying the new comedy flag. Saturday Night Live and I, however, were destined to meet."

"I first appeared on Saturday Night Live in October 1976. I felt powerful butterflies just prior to being introduced, especially when I reminded myself that it was live, and anything that went wrong stayed wrong. But it is possible to will confidence. My consistent performing schedule had kept me sharp; it would have been difficult to blow it."

"Today I realize that I misunderstood what my last year of stand-up was about. I had become a party host, presiding not over timing and ideas but over a celebratory bash of my own making. If I had understood what was happening, I might have been happier, but I didn't. I still thought I was doing comedy."

"I WAS DETERMINED to parlay my stand-up success into motion pictures while I still had some clout. A movie career seemed to foster longevity, whereas a career as a comedian who had become a fad seemed finite."

"I had an idea for a film. It came from a line in my act: "It wasn't always easy for me; I was born a poor black child." That was the idea, and that was all I had. I knew only that I wanted the movie to have the feel of a saga, and I toyed with story ideas."

"The world of moviemaking had changed me. Carl Reiner ran a joyful set. Movies were social; stand-up was antisocial. I was not judged every day by a changing audience. It was fun to have lunches with cast and crew and to dream up material in the morning that could be shot seven different ways in the afternoon and evaluated—and possibly perfected—in the editing room months later. The end of a movie is like graduation day, and right or wrong, we felt we had accomplished something wonderful."