

THE LOST HIPSTER

Hollywood has created a powerful image of the Fifties Beat: bearded, wearing turtleneck and beret, or sloppy sweatshirt and jeans, reading Sartre and Camus, listening to folk music and jazz, espousing lost causes. Not that some of these stereotypes were entirely without basis in fact, but the question is which came first, the Euro-style bohemian or the stereotype. As a teenager I went down to Greenwich Village and watched weekend Bronx "beatniks" get off the Fifth Avenue bus in jeans, sandals, and paste-on beards. They went to the coffee houses that attracted tourists in the hope they would get lucky. The popular media created this reality. There was another group that arose in the Fifties, more authentic because they went unnoticed as a group for so many years. They dressed in slick suits and thin ties and talked like the jazz musicians who also dressed that way. They were not existentialists. They were just plain cool. Entertainers and comedians, from Sammy Davis Jr. to Lenny Bruce, they were the hipsters. Jonathan Winters was the ultimate hipster: brilliant, cool, and dangerous.

My brother and I were so taken with "The Wonderful World of Jonathan Winters," a comedy LP I bought in 1960, we memorized the entire album verbatim. Looking back, it reminds me of the fanatics of the Coen brothers' "Big Lebowski." Not only do these aficionados memorize the dialogue, they hold an annual conference to celebrate the movie. The similarity of response is



not surprising, since Jonathan Winters and the Coens have a lot in common. All three are completely eccentric and, like Thelonious Monk, impossible to imitate without looking foolish. They live at the convergence point of surrealism, satire, and the theater of the absurd. Unfortunately, what public memory remains of Jonathan Winters is that of a man dressed like an old lady or as the Hefty trash bag pitchman. The real Jonathan Winters was the one doing amazing standup in clubs. And in his appearances on Jack Paar and Johnny Carson, he stole every show.

But Jonathan Winters didn't do standup like Lenny Bruce, or Mort Sahl, or Bob Newhart. He did set routines like the others, but they almost always ran away into new territory. Improvisation like no one had ever seen before was his forte. Winters had an entire town of characters in his head and they scrambled out of him in unpredictable

ways. But his work challenged his audiences and could be deeply unsettling. Jack Paar famously would plead with him, tears in his eyes, to come out of character. Most times Winters would not. There were things that made him angry too. When a drunk in a club asked him to do a drunk Indian routine, Winters declined, saying that group (some of his ancestry was Native American) had been abused enough. Then he did a whole send up of the Western movie, with wagon train, Indian raid, and cavalry charge. After the smoke clears, we hear taps, and "Not bad, first time play 'um white man horn."

These wild improvisations were dangerous and unsettling to Winters himself. Maybe it was like the original surrealists and their experimentation with automatic writing, trances, and Ouija boards. When Winters ventured into his crazy world there was always the danger he might not come back. He was in and out of mental institutions for a period of time and often joked that if he said too much, they'd send him back to the "zoo."

The big question was what happened to this brilliant comic. Hollywood kept trying to set him up in movies and television shows, but they all failed. Part of the reason was the producers wanted him to be amusing but not controversial. That pretty much destroyed any chance for him to do the wonderful multi-voice improvisation he had invented. He was not an actor; he was a standup comedian. The producers wanted him to dress up as

Maude Frickert and his other characters. That pathetic literalism just killed the thing that made those characters so amazing in their original form: they were coming out of the mouth of a man in a hipster suit and tie. The incongruity was part of the force that made them work.

How did this hipster get lost? He was not the first brilliant person to go to Hollywood and disappear, like the Coen brothers' memorable protagonist in "Barton Fink." He was not even the only acknowledged

comic genius that was totally rejected by Hollywood for no good reason. Elaine May met a similar fate. As she said in a recent interview, "If all the people who hate 'Ishtar' had seen the movie, I'd be a rich woman today." How can we do this? Many talented people labor in obscurity, never to be acknowledged. No, the cream does not always rise to the top. But how can we treat our best this way? There is so much mediocrity in all the arts, there has to be some better way to celebrate and encourage the

people we know to be our greatest treasures. Jonathan Winters was such a treasure. At the very least, as Dick Cavett suggested in a *New York Times* op-ed, someone should archive all of his television appearances on the "Tonight Show." I would add that they should also include any tape from the club performances as well. May Jonathan Winters continue to do gigs in comic heaven. He was a good and deserving man.



Daniel Estrada Del Cid