

USC School of Dramatic Arts

The History of Stand-Up Comedy **THTR 192-g** **4 Units**

Time: Mon/Wed 4:00-5:50pm

Location: DMC 156

Instructor: Wayne Federman

In-person office hours (or Zoom) by appointment

E-mail: WayneFed@usc.edu

Prerequisite(s): N/A

IT Help: ITS

Hours of Service: 7am-10pm PST

Contact Info: 213-740-5555 or consult@usc.edu

Catalogue Description:

This GE (A) course will chronicle and analyze how stand-up comedy developed in the United States, from the lecture comedians of the mid-1800s to the current touring performers of HBO, Comedy Central, and Netflix. Students will gain a comprehensive overview and understanding of this relatively new art form.

Course Description

Starting in the mid-1800s, stand-up comedy has flourished in the United States. The venues, technologies, and acceptable onstage language continue to change, but the act of standing alone on stage, evoking laughter, connects comedians through time.

The Lyceum movement, vaudeville, burlesque, revues, coffeehouses, nightclubs, resorts, comedy clubs, and the internet have each helped produce celebrated comedy performers.

Special effort will be given to contextualize legendary performers of the past like Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Bert Williams, Bob Hope, Moms Mabley, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Joan Rivers along with today's popular comedians such as Chris Rock, Bill Burr, Bo Burnham, Sarah Silverman, and Dave Chappelle.

Students will evaluate how each era of stand-ups have adapted, and embraced, emerging technologies such as electronic stage microphones, motion pictures, network radio, television, long-playing albums, late-night television, cable television, smartphones, and internet streaming.

The instructor is an Emmy-winning comedian who has appeared in over 80 film and television shows. Professionals from the world of stand-up will also guest lecture and participate in student Q/As. Past speakers from Professor Federman's USC classes have included Gary Gulman, Beth Stelling, Jacqueline Novak, Ron Funches, Margaret Cho, Sam Morril, Judd Apatow, and Fahim Anwar.

Objectives and Goals

1. To distinguish and comprehend the major stand-up comedy eras.
2. To compare comedy styles from different periods. Ex: how a vaudeville comic in 1915 might approach stand-up differently than a coffeehouse performer in 1963.
3. To evaluate and analyze the impact of emerging technologies on the art form.
4. To analyze how stand-up comedy navigates the evolving use of profanity, "offensive" subjects, and social taboos.
5. To evaluate the changing, and growing, impact of stand-up comics in both popular culture and politics.
6. To analyze how pressure groups have used their influence to try and silence comedians.
7. To track the inclusion of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual identity in stand-up comedy.

Areas of Study

- **Analysis:** Examining the political and social influence of comedians. How did the social structures and taboos of the day influence the style of comedy? Why was Lenny Bruce arrested multiple times? How did comedians eventually find a home as influential political commentators?

- **Connectivity:** How stand-up comedy blossomed under capitalism. Who owned these venues? How did the comedians adapt? Where does the term "blue" come from? Why was the "chitlin circuit" necessary? How did "party records" emerge? To what extent did organized crime (mafia) run nightclubs?

- **Context:** How did major entertainment structures, like vaudeville and the Borscht Belt, collapse? How did the comedy clubs emerge and why do they continue to thrive? How did HBO revolutionize stand-up content and presentation?

- **Engagement:** Students will watch, listen, and contextualize the different stand-up styles through the decades. From ethnic knockabout comics of the late 1800s to ironic deadpan acts of Comedy Central to current streaming acts.

- **Making:** Students must write original, sourced, papers on stand-up performers and the history of the art form. They will also create a hypothetical stand-up show of three comedians from different eras. This will help develop critical, analytical, and creative thinking plus enhance writing and research skills.

Required Reading

- *The History of Stand-Up: From Mark Twain to Dave Chappelle*. Wayne Federman 2021 (included with course).
- Numerous magazine articles, dissertations, newspaper articles, web posts, and book excerpts – all listed on the course schedule below. All available on the web or through USC’s library portal.

Other Suggested Readings (available at USC library)

Apatow, Judd *Sick in the Head*. Random House 2015
Berger, Phil *The Last Laugh*. William Morrow 1975
Forbes, Camille F. *Introducing Bert Williams*. Basic Civitas 2008
Foxx, Redd, Miller, Norma *Encyclopedia of Black Humor*. W. Ritchie Press 1977
Knoedelseder, William *I’m Dying Up Here*. 2009
Laurie Jr., Joe *From Vaude Video*. Henry Holt 1951
Martin, Steve *Born Standing Up*. Scribner 2007
Nachman, Gerald *Seriously Funny*. Back Stage Books, 2004
Nesteroff, Kliph *The Comedians*. Grove Press, 2015
Oswalt, Patton *Silver Screen Fiend*. Scribner 2015
S.D., Trav No Applause, *Just Throw Money*. Faber and Faber 2005
Saul, Scott *Becoming Richard Pryor*. Harper Collins 2005
Shydner, Ritch *Kicking Through the Ashes*. Mr. Media Books 2016
Watkins, Mel *On the Real Side*. Lawrence Hill Books 1999
Wilde, Larry *The Great Comedians Talk About Comedy*. Lyle Stewart 1973
Zoglin, Richard *Comedy at the Edge*. Bloomsbury USA, 2009

Suggested Stand-Up Documentaries

Comedian – (2017) Jerry Seinfeld returns to standup. Netflix. dir. Christian Charles
Dying Laughing – (2016) interviews with comedians. dir. Lloyd Stanton.
George Carlin’s American Dream (2022) – Carlin’s life in depth. Dir. Judd Apatow
Hysterical – (2021) the special challenges faced by female stand-ups. dir Sheila Nevins
I Am Comic – (2010) a close look at stand-up comedy. dir. Jordan Brady
Misery Loves Comedy – (2015) stand-up interview documentary. dir. Kevin Pollak
When Stand-Up Stood Out – (2016) Boston Comedy Scene of the ‘80s. dir. Fran Solomito

Additional suggested media

Crashing HBO (2017-2019)
Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee (2012-2019)
The Comedians of Comedy - Comedy Central (2003)
Inside the Actors Studio - Dave Chappelle (2006)
The Marvelous Mrs. Masiel - Amazon Prime (2017- present)
Richard Pryor: Live in Concert - feature film (1979)
WTF w/ Marc Maron (podcast) (2008-present)

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Each assignment will receive a grade out of 100.

A = 100-94

A- = 93-90

B+ = 89-86

B = 85-84

B = 83-80

C+ = 79-76

C = 75-74

C- = 73-70

D = 60's

F = 59 and below

A = work of excellent quality; clear understanding of class material coupled with original and creative insight

B = good quality; class material has been understood clearly

C = average quality; class material generally understood, gaps in understanding remain

D = below average quality; identifiable gaps in the understanding of class material

F = inadequate work; gaps in completion of work, poor understanding of class material

Further Grading Notes:

When the GPA falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students whose attendance and participation in class have been excellent or good and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average or poor attendance and participation.

If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W. I will be happy to discuss your work at any time.

Assignments

Week Three

Open Internet Test: In-Class

Week Five

Performance Analysis Paper: How early stand-up evolved. 3-5 pages, MLA Format

Week Eight

Midterm Paper: Annotated and sourced bibliography of one comedian. 4-6 pages, MLA Format

Week Eleven

Critical Analysis Paper: Examine two technological advances – sound recordings, microphones, radio, network television, comedy albums, late-night, cable television, YouTube, podcasting, or social media on stand-up. 3-5 pages. MLA Format.

Week Fourteen, Fifteen

Final Project: Create a hypothetical show from a specific era using (at least) three headlining comedians NOT from the same time period. Video (minimum 4 minutes) or PowerPoint presentation (minimum 3 minutes).

Course Schedule: Weekly Breakdown

Week One

1. Course Overview, online library The Mark Twain Prize Winners

2. The Four Forefathers (Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, Bert Williams, Will Rogers)

Readings:

History of Stand-Up Chapter 1

"*The Babes in the Wood*": Artemus Ward's "Double Health" to Mark Twain

Edgar M. Branch, Vol. 93, No. 5. Pages 955-959 and 966-972 (12 pages)

Icons of African American Comedy: A Joke of a Different Color. Bert Williams.

Eddie M. Tafoya, pages 1-15

Viewings: Bert Williams Poker Game 1916

(YouTube) Will Rogers on FDR 1932 (YouTube)

Week Two

3. Vaudeville and TOBA (ethnic monologists, The Palace, blue material, Orpheum circuit, Frank Fay, Charlie Case)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 2

The Vaudevillians, pages 7-17 (Internet Archive)

Viewings: Milton Berle stand-up at Winter Garden, 1936 (YouTube)

Moms Mabley performance film, 1938 (YouTube)

Red Skelton – Guzzler's Gin – Skelton's Scrapbook 1950 (YouTube)

4. Burlesque, Revues, Recordings (Minsky Brothers, Ziegfeld Follies, Cohen on the Telephone)

Readings: *Will Rogers at the Ziegfeld Follies*. Arthur Frank Wertheim. Pages 3-21

Viewings: Eddie Cantor Friars Frolic 1931 (YouTube)

Cohen on the Telephone (audio only) (YouTube)

Week Three

5. Radio Part One (Birth of NBC & CBS, advertising, Eddie Cantor, Ed Wynn)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 3

Viewings: George Burns on Vaudeville vs. Radio (YouTube)

Fred Allen radio show (YouTube)

They Shoot Horses Don't They? Film trailer (YouTube)

6. Open Internet Test (10 points)

Week Four

7. Radio Part Two (Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Bob Hope, Fanny Brice, local comedians)

Reading: *Becoming Benny. The Evolution of Jack Benny's Character Comedy from Vaudeville to Radio.*

Kathryn Fuller-Seeley. Conclusion. 6 pages.

Viewings: Bob Hope Armed Forces Radio Broadcast film 1942

(YouTube) Ed Wynn at Disneyland. 1962 (YouTube)

8. Resorts, Presentation Houses (Catskills, Las Vegas, Miami Beach, Apollo, Roxy, Paramount, Jean Carroll)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 4

Viewings: Jack Benny and Fred Allen at Roxy Theater. 1948 (YouTube)

Jerry Lewis on Catskills (YouTube)

Jean Carroll 1951 (YouTube)

Week Five

9. Nightclubs, Chitlin Circuit, Strip Clubs (Mafia, speakeasies, Moms Mabley, Timmie Rogers, Copacabana, Ciro's, Latin Quarter, Don Rickles, Shecky Greene)

Readings: *The Comedians, The Mob and the American Supperclub.* WFMU Kliph Nesteroff. 9 pages.

Viewing: GoodFellas Henny Youngman (YouTube)

Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis at Copa / Paramount 1955 (YouTube)

Paper #1 Due End of Week Five. How early stand-up evolved. 3-5 pages, MLS Format

10. Early Television (Ed Sullivan Show, Milton Berle, Texaco Star Theater, variety shows)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 5

Viewings: Milton Berle hosting Texaco Star Theater 1950 (YouTube)

Joan Rivers talks about performing on The Ed Sullivan Show 1990 (YouTube)

Week Six

11. The New Wave, Late-Night (Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, The Sickniks, The Tonight Show, daytime talk shows)

Readings: *Nightclubs: The Sickniks.* Time Magazine. July 13, 1959

Viewings: Dick Gregory – Hungry i (YouTube)

Mort Sahl – Hungry i (YouTube)

Godfrey Cambridge - college show (Parr) (YouTube)

12. The Comedy Record Boom (Bob Newhart, Shelly Berman, Nichols and May, Redd Foxx)

Viewings: Moms Mabley - The Funniest Woman in the World (YouTube)

Bob Newhart – Button Down Mind (YouTube)

Redd Foxx – Laugh of the Party (YouTube)

Shelley Berman – Inside Shelley Berman (YouTube)

Week Seven

13. Greenwich Village (Hootenannies, Joan Rivers, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, early Pryor and Carlin)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 6

The Life and Times of Rusty Warren WFMU. Kliph Nesteroff. 6 pages.

Viewings: Carlin on Tonight Show w/ Sahl (YouTube)

Carlin Hollywood Palace (YouTube)

Richard Pryor TV debut (YouTube)

Woody Allen – Hootenanny 1963 (YouTube)

Joan Rivers on Ed Sullivan Show (YouTube)

14. Comedy Clubs (The Improvisation, Pips, Rodney Dangerfield, Robert Klein)

Viewings: Robert Klein at Haverford College. HBO. 1975 (YouTube)

Rodney Dangerfield on Jackie Gleason (YouTube)

Week Eight

Midterm Paper Due. Annotated and sourced bibliography of one comedian (pre comedy Boom). 4-6 pages, MLA Format

15. The '70s Part One (Johnny Carson, California migration, Comedy Store, Freddie Prinze, Catch a Rising Star, Comedy Store)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 7

Viewings: Freddie Prinze Tonight Show Debut. 1973. (YouTube)

Richard Belzer at Catch 1977 (YouTube)

16. The '70s Part Two (SNL, Steve Martin, HBO hour special, Richard Pryor Film, first road comedy clubs)

Readings: *The Early David Letterman* 1967-1980 Kliph Nesteroff. WFMU

Viewings: Freddie Prinze and Friends w/ Jay Leno 1976 HBO (YouTube)

George Carlin 7 Dirty Words (outtake Midnight Special)

Steve Martin at Universal Amphitheater (w/ Alan King) (YouTube)

Pryor Live in Concert 1979 (YouTube)

Week Nine

17. 80s Comedy Boom 1 - Clubs (Jerry Seinfeld, Eddie Murphy, Jay Leno, Elayne Boosler, Comedy Cellar)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 8

Viewings: Seinfeld on Carson 1981 (YouTube)

Elayne Boosler on Letterman 1988 (YouTube)

Eddie Murphy Delirious HBO 1982 (YouTube)

Week Ten

18. 80s Comedy Boom 2 - Cable TV (*Evening at The Improv*, *MTV*, *Comic Strip Live*, home video, Comedy Central)

Viewings: Adam Sandler on *Evening at The Improv* (YouTube)

Rosanne Barr *Tonight Show* Debut (YouTube)

Steven Wright *Tonight Show* Debut / backstage (YouTube)

Sam Kinison on Rodney Dangerfield's HBO special (YouTube)

19. Alternative Comedy, Sitcoms (Janeane Garofalo, *UnCabaret*, *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, Jim Carrey)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 9

No Laughing Matter: County comedy clubs hang on—barely. Los Angeles Times. May 25, 1995

Viewings: Janeane Garofalo *One Night Stand*. HBO (YouTube)

Jim Carrey impressions (YouTube)

Week Eleven

20. Black comedy explosion (Martin Lawrence, *Def Comedy Jam*, *In Living Color*, *Original Kings of Comedy*, *All Things Comedy*, Robin Harris)

Viewings: Bernie Mac – *Def Comedy Jam*. HBO (YouTube)

Chris Rock – *Bring the Pain*. HBO (YouTube)

Original Kings of Comedy. Dir – Spike Lee. HBO (YouTube)

Critical Analysis Paper: Examine two technological advances – sound recordings, microphones, radio, network television, comedy albums, late-night, cable television, YouTube, podcasting, or social media on stand-up. 3-5 pages. MLA Format.

21. Internet Boom Part One (Dane Cook, MySpace, YouTube, Bo Burnham, Anjelah Johnson)

Readings: *History of Stand-Up* Chapter 10

Viewings: Bo Burnham – *My Whole Family*. 2006 (YouTube)

Anjelah Johnson – *Nails* 2007 (YouTube)

Dane Cook – *Tourgasm*. HBO (YouTube)

Week Twelve

22. Internet Boom Part Two (Marc Maron, Podcasting, Twitter, Kevin Hart, Netflix)

Readings: *Having the Laugh: Rick Uchwat opened Zanies before stand-up comedy got hot*. Chicago Tribune. Nov. 9, 2003

Viewings: Marc Maron – *WTF* (audio only) Robin Williams.

Bill Burr on *Philadelphia* (YouTube)

Kumail Nanjiani *Kumail Nanjiani and Jonah Ray Meltdown* Comedy Central (YouTube)

Kevin Hart at Lincoln Financial Football stadium (YouTube)

23. Politics, Personal, and Speech Restrictions (*Daily Show*, Bill Maher, Amber Ruffin, John Oliver)

Viewings: Hannah Gadsby *Nanette*. Netflix

Maria Bamford – *The Special Special Special* (YouTube)

Week Thirteen

24. Covid Shutdown (DIY, live streaming, outdoor shows, Sarah Cooper, Ziwe Fumudoh)

Viewings: Sarah Cooper does Trump (YouTube)
Sam Morril. I Got This. (YouTube)

25. Stand-up Today (Festivals, TikTik, Mega Shows)

Viewings: Gabriel Ingleses Dodger Stadium. NetFlix
John Mulaney at Hollywood Bowl. Netflix.

Week Fourteen.

26. Broadway and Academy Awards Hosts (Lily Tomlin, Victor Borge, Jackie Mason, Mike Birbiglia, Whoopi Goldberg) Comedy Teams (Weber and Fields, Burns and Allen, Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, Nichols and May, Sklar Brothers)

27. FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Week Fifteen

28. FINAL PRESENTATIONS

29. FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Final topic must be chosen from a list of suggestions, or of students’ own choice subject to instructor approval, before week twelve. Pick one of three options.

1. Video presentation of at least 5 minutes.
2. Class PowerPoint presentation of at least 3 minutes.

30. FINAL –

Open Internet Test

Grading Points Breakdown:

Week 1 in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 2 in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 3 in-class participation / test.....	10 points
Week 4 in-class participation	1 point
Week 5 in-class participation 1st paper due	15 points
Week 6 in-class participation	1 point
Week 7 in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 8 MID-TERM: Biography 2nd paper due	20 points
Week 9 in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 10 in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 11 in-class participation, 3rd paper due	10 points
Week 12 in-class participation	1 point
Week 13, in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 14, in-class participation.....	1 point
Week 15, FINAL PRESENTATION	20 points
FINAL – Open Internet Test	10 points

Grading Breakdown

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Participation	15%
Test	10%
Paper #1	15%
Midterm #2	20%
Paper #3	10%
PRESENTATION	20%
<u>Final</u>	<u>10%</u>
Total	100%

General expectations

Students are expected to be capable of taking full and accurate notes on lectures, and actively participate in discussions. I will sometimes use PowerPoint in class (mainly for images - sometimes text), as well as video and audio clips. I am happy to share these files afterward (usually not before lecture), but these are not a substitute for your own notes.

If you are having trouble following lectures, try sitting closer to the front of the room, recording lectures, and getting help from me outside of class. Please feel free to talk to me about any problems you are having.

Written work, apart from tests, will normally be submitted electronically, either via e-mail or on Blackboard. On a title page include your name, the date the work was submitted, and the title of the assignment; your main text should be double spaced. All work must be entirely your own, unless you are specifically instructed to collaborate.

See the guidelines (below) on academic integrity as to what constitutes plagiarism, or proper and improper use of sources.

Since this class covers a fair amount of material, it is to your advantage to make use of my office hours, whether in person or via Zoom – not only if you are having problems with the material, but also simply in order to find out on a topic more than can be covered in class, or so that we can become better acquainted. The pieces and information covered in class are only a starting point; don't limit yourself to just that.

You may use laptop computers or tablets (*not* cell phones; please also silence your ringer before class starts) for note-taking during lecture, and for accessing electronic resources *as directed by me*, but please refrain from e-mailing, phoning, texting, checking Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other activities unrelated to class.

Non-class-related electronic activity during lecture may result in temporary confiscation of phones, expulsion for the rest of the lecture, and/or a grade penalty.

Attendance

In-person attendance is expected, if you are healthy and can pass Trojan Check; attendance will be checked. We will take a 10-minute break near the midpoint of the class.

You are responsible for all material, whether you were there when it was presented or not. If for some *legitimate* reason you must miss class, arrive late, or leave early, please inform me *in advance* (in person, or by e-mail).

Legitimate excuses include illness, personal emergencies, or occasional conflicts with master classes or rehearsals of large ensembles, but *not* lessons, or outside gigs.

During this time while we're still dealing with a pandemic, attendance may be lower than usual. If you need miss one or more classes, try to get lecture notes from a classmate, and ask me any questions you might have, afterward.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for DSP and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 814-4618 (Video Phone), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies. See the university's site on Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Campus Support & Intervention (CSI) – (213) 740-0411

Campus Support & Intervention is an office within Campus Wellbeing and Crisis Intervention. We are a team of professionals here to assist students, faculty, and staff in navigating complex issues. Whether you are here seeking support for yourself or someone else, we are available to help you problem solve, understand options, and connect with resources. <https://uscsa.usc.edu>

Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, and stress fitness workshops.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <https://titleix.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. equity.usc.edu

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://titleix.usc.edu/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. dsp.usc.edu

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. diversity.usc.edu

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. emergency.usc.edu

USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community. dps.usc.edu