

Rolling Stone Interview

Robin Williams talks for the RS 2008 Comedy Issue Questionnaire

Adam Baer: Who inspired you the most?

Robin Williams: Oh, that's easy. Jonathan Winters. He made my father laugh. When my father watched him on television...[Reminiscing] My father, who was a bit of a tough nut to crack, laughing at Jonathan... There was this thing when he was on the old Tonight Show; he was playing an effeminate great, white hunter and he says, "I have mainly squirrels." "What are you waiting for?" "Their nuts." And I saw my dad [laugh] and went, "Okay. That's it. I'm in." (In old-school radio voice): It was whennn there was jussst television; there *wasss* no YouTube.

AB: So was that when comedy seemed like something you wanted to do? When did you first think: I want to make people laugh?

RW: It must've been 1963 or so. When Jack Powers was on The Tonight Show, which is way beyond even...I'll... have to Wikipedia that. It was before Wikipedia! It was just black and white TV. When it hit me that I wanted to be a comedian was about in college. That's where the ladies were--in the improv theater class--and I was in college studying political science and economics, and that wasn't helping. The co-education class was improv-theater. Then I went to that and two things happened: there were ladies, and secondly, there was improvisational comedy. I went, "Wait a minute. You can make this up?" And that's when I think got the jones.

AB: Looking back now, what do you think was your biggest break?

RW: My biggest break had to be "Mork and Mindy." "Mork and Mindy" kicked it way into gear. I had been doing about three or four years of stand-up and then there was an open-audition for "Happy Days," and I remember Richard Lewis walking up to the same audition going, "I only speak Swedish," and I went: "That's not a good sign." And going the audition with Gary Marshall, just kind of being, "I got nothing to lose," and going for the fence. [I remember] Gary Marshall saying, "Don't worry, we're not doing Shakespeare." And after four years, I realized that. But that was the big break--that was from zero to a hundred. It was pretty crazy. I still meet people today who go, "Hello Mork," and it's weird when it's coming from Henry Kissinger. But I still get that. People mispronounce it 'Pork and Cindy,' 'Dork and Carly.' But it's still in peoples' memory banks, despite the Academy Award—that's the thing that people mostly will know.

AB: As Steve Martin said, comedy is not pretty. Tell us a story of a joke you told or wrote that didn't work, or a night when you bombed terribly.

RW: One time I was opening up for a music act. I was opening up for a disco thing, and there was a record company executive sitting in the front row, sitting at the table, snorting coke, mouthing very quietly, "Get off." That was a memory that sticks. Obviously it would have a burning effect. One of those moments where you go, "Oh, great. Thank you." Sort of like a kidney stone: it passed, but not without a painful memory.

AB: If you could get a chance to see any of the greats -- at any time in history -- who would it be, and when?

RW: I've seen a lot of them up close. I got to see Pryor working when he was live on Sunset. I got to see Carlin. I got to see Jonathan work. I would have loved to have met Groucho Marx, whether he was on acid or not. And Harpo, just because he was supposedly really funny. I'm just lucky enough right now to have lived at the time when it was kicked into high gear. Like Steve [Martin]. And the people I've seen recently. Someone like Patton Oswald, who just blows my mind. The days when Eddie Izzard was starting out. It's kind of wonderful to see all the people who over the years, in different places, and go, 'Damn, man, such an interesting journey. I've seen great people along the way.' I would've loved to have seen Lenny Bruce. Barry Levinson saw him live once and said that the great thing about Lenny was that he just talked about things. Stuff that you do. And the other thing he did was relate everything to show business. Like if the pope had an agent, or Hitler's agent. I would've liked to have seen Lenny in the old days. That would've been pretty wild. They said before the court trial, that it was really funny. If the judge saw him, he would've acquitted him.

AB: Is there a person you consider to be underappreciated?

RW: There's a guy, Rick Overton, who I think is pretty wonderful. He's a very brave guy. Will Garish is a comic in San Francisco. There's a lot of different people. And a guy who is getting his due is Patton Oswald. Every time I see him recently, I go, "Damn, the dude's on fire. He's flying." When you see him like I saw him here, he was playing a gig in Seattle, he's just amazing, really kick-ass funny, and some of it is just a story about his life, seeing a rat in his backyard and then he's talking about hardcore politics and they're equally funny and outrageous. He don't need the stage time; he's covered.

AB: Is there a show or a writer who has had the biggest influence on comedy?

RW: I don't know. If you think of one comic, it would be Pryor, for white comics and black comics alike, someone who created characters and pushed the envelope. At least for a lot of people I know, he really influenced them. And the young Lenny Bruce. And Carlin, as a writer. I think he's the closest thing to Swift. He's like a weird combination of Twain and Swift and a little bit of old time New York. One of the last things he told me was just because the circus has left town, doesn't mean the monkey is off your back.

AB: What do you consider the funniest shows on TV.

RW: The funniest ones? Some of the episodes of Larry David. It's hard, too, because of now, some of the stuff on YouTube. But I would say Larry David. The dark side of Jerry Seinfeld. And Chappelle's Show—Chappelle's great. I'm glad he's still performing. And obviously Chris Rock. I've just been working, I haven't been watching anything new. I haven't been watching much TV. I've been off the radar, doing this movie. I gotta get back in it. The Mighty Boosh, it's an English show, it's two guys, it's actually a year old but it's pretty crazy. Check it out. Some of the stuff they do is so fucking weird. Kind of like Python, a little like Ali G.

AB: What's your favorite film comedy of all time?

RW: "Dr. Strangelove." Of all time, the best. That kicks it the hardest. That, for me, is the greatest character comedy of all time--Peter Sellers. The first time I saw Sacha, when I saw Ali G and all that stuff, that was astonishing. I haven't seen too much. Nothing that's kicked my ass that much. I'm being stunted by a senior moment. I can't think of it. I'm asking other people.

AB: What influence do you think the internet has had upon comedy--and do you see it as a positive influence?

RW: I think it's opened the doors. In the old days, you got your 15 minutes of fame and now everybody gets it on networks. It's incredible. It's immediate. It really does cut out the middle man. And it's pretty democratic because you see it go up right away. It's astonishing. Some of it's great, some of it's crap. But it's immediate. Everyday, new stuff. In terms of setting the bar high or low, the bar is down. And it's an open bar. Welcome.

AB: Can you leave us with your favorite joke?

RW: My favorite joke? Good luck printing it. Guy's having sex with his wife. All of a sudden he looks over, and there in the doorway is his son, about eight years old. Kid looks horrified and runs away. The guy says to his wife, "Well, I'd better talk to Timmy." He puts on his clothes and goes to Timmy's room, and there's Timmy nailing Grandma. The father goes, "Oh, my God!" And the kid goes, "Not so funny when it's your mom, is it?"

AB: Man, I didn't know where that was going. Thought you were going to head into Aristocrats territory.

RW: Good luck. The Aristocrats joke? So this guy is fucking a cow...