Lenny Bruce: The Difficult Martyr

In the comments section attached to a Lenny Bruce video on YouTube someone has accused the stand-up of being anti-Semitic and a “life hating Christian monster”.

Since Bruce, who was born Leonard Alfred Schneider on 13 October 1925, died at the age of forty due to a drug overdose they might partially have a legitimate, if insensitive, point to make with the latter charge.

However, the former indicates the late satirist’s work continues to be misunderstood nearly forty-one years after his death.

After abandoning a more conventional style of humour that consisted of impersonations and bird calls, the Jewish comedian adopted a digressive and hip act that was full of political insights and what was viewed by some as vulgarity.

According to the biographer Albert Goldman, “Lenny worshipped the gods of Spontaneity, Candor and Free Association. He fancied himself an oral jazzman.”

Predating by decades those activists who reclaim terms like “queer” to subvert their negative connotations, Bruce’s routines were also replete with words like “kike” and “nigger”.

The play that was written about the New Yorker features him making the following statement during a gig:

*If President Kennedy would just go on television and say, “I would like to introduce you to all the niggers in my cabinet”, and if he’d just say “nigger nigger nigger nigger nigger” to every nigger he saw, “boogie boogie boogie boogie boogie nigger nigger nigger nigger” ‘til nigger didn’t mean anything anymore, then you could never make some six-year-old black kid cry because somebody called him a nigger at school.*
While Bruce’s analysis seems rather naive given he was performing at a time when African-Americans were still fighting for basic rights, he had a sharp understanding of the power of language and who benefits from certain words being judged to be offensive.

“Take away the right to say fuck and you take away the right to say fuck the government”, he argued.

He also understood that minorities suffered because things that should have been thought indecent were not.

On the Steve Allen Show in the late 1950s, Bruce, in a rambling and only occasionally funny monologue, maintained that “segregation” and “shows that exploit homosexuality, narcotics and prostitution under the guise of helping these societal problems” were odious to him.

Naturally the powers that be did not agree with his opinion.

In the ensuing years, Bruce found himself in strife on eight occasions for saying, among other things, “cocksucker” and “where is that dwarf mother-fucker?”

Lenny, the 1974 movie that starred Dustin Hoffman as Bruce, suggested that the drug busts he was also subject to were part of a broader plot to ruin his career.

**Bruce was arrested for pretending to be a priest for the purposes of persuading people to donate to a “charity”**

Although the legend of Bruce as a free speech champion whose drug use worsened as his problems with the system increased contains a considerable amount of truth, it is obvious from old television footage that he was taking dope prior to his celebrated run-ins with the law (before he was famous Bruce was arrested for pretending to be a priest for the purposes of persuading people to donate to a “charity”).

Even if Bruce’s notoriety ensured he found a larger audience, his later shows – when he could find a club that would employ him – were little more than him reading and responding to transcripts from his trials.

In an article on Salon.com that discussed Bruce’s obscenity woes and recent attempts to limit individual freedoms in the United States, Gary Kamiya contended that “(the comic) makes a very difficult martyr – he was too irascible, too self-destructive, too perverse, too unclassifiable. But he was a martyr nonetheless – a heartbreakingly vulnerable renegade who was broken by the final tail-fish of the dying dragon of American Puritanism.”

Lenny Bruce passed away on 3 August 1966.
Darlene: Hi Tim, thanks for joining me in the studio, well, cheers for sort of being in my bedroom in Melbourne. It’s incumbent on me to mention one of the most exciting snippets of information I discovered about you while padding the web. “I love Sting” is the quote I found on the ABC’s site. As a thirty-something female, I am proud to declare that “Sting rocks”. Why did you use the word “tragic” in the sentence prior to your declaration of love?

Tim: Geez, I said that? I do love Sting, and defend my right to do so because he’s got one of the most beautiful voices in the industry, and he plays with amazing musos. As you know, I promote the notion that I’m a slightly uncool, middle-class, wannabe rock star, and in that context, a love of Sting is part of the “tragedy”, I guess.

Darlene: You’ve been in many quality theatre and television productions during your career including The Tempest and Comedy Inc. Why did you decide to let your parents down and become a comic?

Tim: I was an extra on Comedy Inc. I’d forgotten about that. As mentioned, I tend to exploit the failed rock star thing in my comedy, but actually what I am is an actor/musician who took a long time to realise how to put all the bits together. In hindsight, I guess my strengths have always been songwriting and performing. The comedic side was always there but I didn’t think to focus on it. Looking back, the path I’ve taken seems so obvious. My folks have never been “stage parents”, but they never stopped me doing what I wanted. They, of course, wanted me to get a vocational degree to “fall back on”, but they love what I’m doing now.

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Darlene: Your work covers a range of topics including religion, the environment, marriage and an obnoxious stockbroker with a girlfriend possibly named Darlene. The writer Fiona Scott-Norman has argued that, “The comedians I like are the ones who have something to say. I don’t much mind what it is as long you’re passionate. Laughter is one of the most amazing tools for social change in the world; you can change how people think if you can make them laugh.” What do you think about Scott-Norman’s analysis and how important do you think it is for humour to be about something more than having a giggle?

Tim: If Fiona said it…it’s bound to be so, in my experience. I suppose Fiona and (Eddie Perfect)
and I could all write huge bloody essays on this question. We’ve certainly had big discussions about it. I think I probably think something along the lines of:

- Individual comedy acts change people in tiny increments. It’s the cumulative impact of all (socially aware) art that can create more open minds. There are of course exceptions to this. Sometimes an audience member’s thinking can be “radicalised” by watching one act/hearing one song/seeing one painting. I think this mostly happens in young people. That is, teenagers in their philosophically formative stages;

- I think laughing at the stuff that worries us is empowering and cathartic. There’s nothing at all wrong with laughter for laughter’s sake (i.e. without any intent to change audience beliefs). However, there’s always a subtext, even if it was not intended; and

- Personally, all I try to do is say things I think about in an “interesting” way in the hope that people might mull over them a little. I don’t have a clear political agenda; however, I admire those who do. Trouble is if I start writing material about the fleeting minutiae of Aussie politics, it’s not going to entertain or inform my audiences in London eighteen months later.

Darlene: When I put the following quote to Eddie Perfect, he used a word that my postmodern friends like to reclaim; however, as I’m an old-fashioned feminist, I’m warning you to watch your potty mouth. Is Tom Lehrer a “cunt” due to the following statement which appeared in an article in The Sydney Morning Herald, and how would you respond to his declaration? Audiences like to think that satire is doing something. But, in fact, it is mostly to leave themselves satisfied. Satisfied rather than angry, which is what they should be.

Tim: Did Ed say Tom Lehrer’s a cunt? Hilarious. Since I’ve been in the UK, I’ve noticed no one uses that word over here. I pine for the insouciant fondness with which Australians bandy it about. However, I’m not totally clear on what old Tom is say-
Darlene: Do you think artists with a political element to their work inevitably preach to the converted?

Tim: Yes, inevitably. But that doesn’t really matter. It’s nice to have one’s beliefs affirmed while you’re being entertained. And there’s always the chance you might change a few minds. I feel squeamish about the implication of the word “converted” in this sense. It suggests that an artist is someone who has earned the right to “convert”. Which of course we all think we have. Cunts (Sorry).

Darlene: “Peace Anthem for Palestine” is a fun song that celebrates a behaviour two warring groups have in common. That is, not eating pigs. Please discuss whether you have received any negative feedback about the use of the word “Palestine”.

Tim: Never had protests about using Palestine. I usually refer to Israel in my intro, but not always. One reviewer said he found it about as funny as a suicide bomber. I took that to mean he didn’t find it funny, but maybe I misjudged his sense of humour. Mostly people love it. It’s my favourite tune to play, and it accurately reflects my feelings about religious conflict.

Darlene: There have been criticisms in the past about the Melbourne Comedy Festival’s refusal to include performers who crack jokes about Islam. Songs like “Ten Foot Cock and a Few Hundred Virgins” suggest you’re an equal opportunity taker of the piss. What topics do you regard as off-limits given the current political climate and what do you think about comics who kick the boot into Christians but leave other faiths untouched?

Tim: All religion should always be a target. There’s never a time when religion should be off-limits to satirists. It’s one of the biggest, most powerful and influential forces in the world, and it’s ridiculous and damaging hypocrisy needs to be pointed out over and over again. It’s just a matter of finding ways to do it that are interesting. Obviously the positive attributes of religion are substantial too, but talking about them is not in my job description.
The final episodes of The Office plumbed the depths of despair, but ultimately celebrated the importance of having people in our lives who accept us for who we are.

Emerging at a time when many comedies were pursuing the lazy path of sending up other shows, The Office's perceptive, if somewhat brutal, take on the employees of a paper merchant's firm was welcome, even when we could see our worst traits mirrored in characters such as the insufferable David Brent (Ricky Gervais) and risk-averse Tim Canterbury (Martin Freeman).

Tim will never leave the position he loathes to return to university.

After series two finished with Brent almost out of a job, and receptionist Dawn Tinsley planning a new life overseas, the Christmas specials revealed that nobody had moved on, whether they remained at Wernham Hogg or not.

With Brent 'retrenched' from the middle management role that gave him an identity and a captive audience, we witnessed him struggling to establish himself as an "entertainer" following his turn as the "boss from hell".

During the day he was selling cleaning and personal hygiene products.

"Can I ask you something", Brent questioned a client who was mortified at being filmed, "who does your tampons?"

Even if Brent's level of self-awareness was always low, he seemed to realise in the final episodes that his life wasn’t great because he spent a lot of time at his former workplace trying to recreate what he believed he once had.

"You don't like it 'cause I'm popular; it was snatched away from me, you don't like me coming back because it reminds (you)", he asserted to his
enemy, Neil Godwin, who became area manager after Brent failed a physical.

Neil, played by the conventionally handsome Patrick Baladi, came across as a tad snide and insecure when previously he had seemed charming and thoughtful.

While we always sensed it, we finally got a chance to see Brent's loneliness, depression and anger and the way he self-medicated with alcohol and exaggerated merriment.

There is a scene in *The Bedsitter* from *The Very Best of Hancock* in which the anti-hero looks sadly out a window before resuming a dialogue with himself. Similarly, Brent's life became interspersed with images of isolation, including when he was seen drinking coffee in a restaurant alone.

Though we know that Dawn et al were responsible for their fate because they settled for less, most could empathise with Tim as he endured the incessant ramblings of his obnoxious colleague, Anne, or recalled his "feelings" for Dawn, who rejected him twice and then flew to Florida with her long-standing, yet incompatible, partner, Lee.

Even though Brent's life was in disarray at the end of episode one of the finale, when Dawn slid her engagement ring down her finger before putting it back in place, the audience was given hope Tim's persistence would pay off.

The writers' cynicism about modern celebrity culture and how it rewards just for being on the idiot box doing bugger was very much in evidence. Sharing the stage with Brent at a particularly awful appearance at a club were a D-lister from *Big Brother* and an actor who starred in commercials for a bank.

"Who are you, what have you been on before, nothing", Brent barked at a woman who failed to recognise him, or be impressed by his ill-conceived impersonation of Austin Powers.

Other special moments are when the never tactful Keith gave Tim advice in the lunchroom about women, Gareth's militaristic management style ("I use discipline. In a war situation, if you want your platoon to go...with you to certain death...it's a direct order, "come with me" and they'll go, "yes, he's got good leadership skills, let's all go with him to our certain death") and Brent's blind dates, during which he was at his worst and near the conclusion, his best.

As is the case with most really good comedies, there were tears mixed with the laughter. However, the last two episodes of *The Office* gave us something to be optimistic and joyful about.
On the fifth anniversary of 11 September 2001, George W. Bush placed a wreath at Ground Zero, the site where the World Trade Centre (WTC) once stood. Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, is a searing look at the destruction of the WTC, and personal and political reactions to it.

Spiegelman combines beautiful illustrations of the frame of a building ablaze with drawings of his fearful self, an anti-Semitic vagrant who, along with some Arab commentators, was sure of Jewish guilt, and Americans with their heads stuck in the ground like ostriches.

“Uncle Sam” douses the burning “Tower Twins” with oil before declaring that he does not care about revenge attacks on “Noo York Smart Aleckers”.

This is an example of how cartoon characters like those traditionally used for the purposes of reactionary propaganda become servants of the author’s opposition to the Iraq War and certain anti-terrorist measures.

There are depictions of a family going from impassively watching the television on 10 September to blankly viewing the television post-9/11, albeit with their hair standing on end and a flag replacing the calendar on the wall in the last of the three panels that feature them.

The author is nearly at his most provocative when he recycles an artistic device from his Pulitzer...
Prize winning *Maus*, in which he portrayed Nazis as cats and Jews as mice.

In his later work, it is ordinary Americans who are rendered as persecuted rodents, while Bush and al-Qaeda are the bad guys.

In his book about graphic novels, Paul Gravett describes *Maus* as “a fresh, involving way for (readers) to try to grasp the Holocaust and its toll on survivors and their children.”

Even if *In the Shadow of No Towers* is sometimes ideologically abhorrent, it is also creative and engaging, as well as being sharply satirical, which the mainstream media and popular culture do not usually have the desire or capacity to be.

In an article by Peter Huck in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Spiegelman claimed that “the American press has become very acquiescent. It’s very vulnerable to tugs on its leash by its owners…the fourth estate’s become a fifth column.”

If this statement is at all true, readers can at least depend on alternative sources of information like graphic novels to add diverse opinions to political discourse.

In an article for *The Age* in 2002, James Norman argued that “the conventional comic strip has evolved to become the “graphic novel”, a formidable new genre, breaking out of specialised comic shops into mainstream bookstores and the international literary spotlight.”

Spiegelman’s effort certainly deserves the attention.

Incidentally, Spiegelman’s most inflammatory moment in *Towers* is a cartoon of Bush and Dick Cheney perched upon an eagle in flight (the eagle had already been dubbed an albatross, and shares the same shaped beak as the bird whose name also denotes a millstone or an impediment).


To say the least, the use of a phrase associated with those who fought back on 9/11 is reprehensible; however, the ability of the artist to combine a number of metaphors in one image is undoubtedly one of the strengths of the medium.
Interview: Eddie Perfect

Darlene: At what point did you decide you were going to be a political performer and what were the issues that influenced that decision?

Eddie: I never made a decision about that. I haven’t made a decision about anything. I only write about what interests me at the time, what subjects I think I have an opinion on that I can express in a creative, interesting…way. I’m interested in politics, so that always finds its way in there inevitably, but then so do other things in my life: sex, drugs, relationships, popular culture, hypocrisy, bullshit, music and trends. I like to speak about politics occasionally if I think I can express it in an interesting way. For example, I haven’t written a politically motivated song, or a song that deals with politics explicitly, since I wrote Angry Eddie in 2003. But as fate would have it, I’m in the middle of writing a song about Kim Jong Il; a song which is entirely unclever (and that’s not a word), it’s not even satire, it’s just childish. It basically blames his obsession with his nuclear program as being the result of having a small dick, even by Asian standards. It’s imaginatively called “Kim Jong Il Has A Teeny Tiny Penis”. So there you go, what a triumphant return to the political arena.

Darlene: Prior to the last federal election, you took part in Rock Against Howard and Time to Go John, while other anti-Howard endeavours such as Not Happy, John were also doing the rounds at the time. In retrospect, what, if anything, do you think those ventures achieved, and do you think they could’ve been approached differently?

Eddie: Well, the obvious desired outcome was to stop Howard winning the election. I mean, with a title like “Time To Go John” you can’t lose the election and then put a sticker under the title on all the unsold DVDs that says “Whenever you feel like… there’s no real rush”. So it didn’t achieve its aims, lofty as they were. What did it achieve? I have no fucking idea. Rock Against Howard was
basically about building a community of Australian musicians in defiance of the government, which is something that a lot of musicians leapt at, myself included. It’s fun to rock against Howard, so it provided a double CD full of tunes you could put on your stereo and hate Howard to. That’s something some people like to do, apparently. It’s all pieces of a puzzle. People embark on projects like DVDs and CDs and concerts and so on, I think, because that’s what they do. There are some bands who until they put their hands up to be on the list, it was unknown how they felt. They had the balls to put their opinion on the line and take a side and I respect that. Rock Against Howard also made Andrew Bolt really angry, so it was worth it to read that article alone.

**Darlene:** Somewhat related to the previous question, do you think that when artists are explicitly political they inevitably preach to the converted or their message is ignored in favour of audiences getting down to the funky beat?

**Eddie:** Peter Cook famously said that he admired the Berlin Cabaret of the 1930s which did so much to prevent World War II and the rise of Hitler. What do political artists achieve? Who knows? I don’t get the whole “preaching to the converted thing”. The only people who get on my back about preaching to the converted are the already-converted. How do I know if an audience is converted? I’ve never met 99% of my audience in my life. And as some folk who come to see my show leave early, call me a cunt, heckle, bitch about me in their blogs, slam me in reviews; I’m pretty sure they’re not converted. When you go and see a rock band, for example, and they’re political, if their entire audience agrees with their particular stance it doesn’t seem to come under scrutiny. I mean, you enjoy the music, the art. Preaching to the converted? I wish someone passed that memo onto the hard-core feminist woman who screamed at me during a trade union rally performance.

**Darlene:** In 2003, Tom Lehrer was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald as saying that, “...audiences like to think that satire is doing something. But, in fact, it is mostly to leave themselves satisfied. Satisfied rather than angry, which is what they should be.” What would you say in response to Lehrer’s statement?

**Eddie:** Fuck off you old cunt. You retired after writing only fifty songs and now you teach maths. You have forfeited the right to comment. I think I can make an audience angry. It doesn’t help your career too much, but it can be done. I’ve done it. I’ve been in the audience and had it done to me. I like it. Do you make them angry at you? Angry with you? Can you have any control over that? I don’t know, it varies. Look, I like Tom Lehrer. I’ve been across him since I was eight. In his day, his material did sometimes make people angry, but you can’t have it both ways. People that “get” edgy stuff enjoy others not getting it. I imagine with you, Darlene, that if you’ve been at one of my gigs where people are not responding to the material, or in the wrong way, or responding negatively, you feel, if you’re onside, that you have an insight that others don’t have. That’s a great thing. I love those audience members. Sometimes there’s only one of them, and they can save your life. I know I like my stuff best when there is a friction; where you put your finger on exactly the thing that is going to divide an audience and place people into certain camps. If everyone comes along for the ride it’s a great boost to the performer, but I start to wonder whether I’ve become complacent. Too many years of seeing too many shows that left me feeling nothing has led me to an attitude where I want to shake everyone by the shoulders to get a reaction.

**Darlene:** Is it a source of frustration that some people don’t get political satire? For example, an academic called George Myconos wrote a piece for New Matilda that was scathing about your performance at a union do. In it, he misquoted your lyrics, missed the anti-exploitation message in
Juice Bar Girl and presumed to speak for the wenches present by accusing you of sexism.

Eddie: He pissed me off mostly because he insulted my hair and he paraphrased my lyrics, which is embarrassing. I mean, if people thought I wrote those lyrics I’d be mortified. No, that may have been a fairly scary gig, but I’m glad it happened. Believe it or not, I’m not really a confrontational guy. If you talked to my friends, they’d say that I’m like a facilitator, a moderator, a peace-keeper. I think very carefully before I put pen to paper and I make sure that I can justify, within myself, that what I am saying is valid by my own values, that those values are clear enough to be fairly acknowledged within a song, and that I’m not making cheap, exploitative jokes at someone else’s expense. I’ve been accused of taking cheap shots at people and that pisses me right off. Yeah, people get it wrong, but they’ll always get it wrong.

Darlene: Generally speaking, would you agree with the thesis that the Left lacks a funny bone or seems unwilling to have a laugh because it’s assumed mirth equals not being serious about the state of the world?

Eddie: No, but I think the old notions of Left and Right are changing, blurring, morphing. I hate the whole left/right thing. I just think there’s bullshit. And I’m an enemy of bullshit. Funny is funny, and I’ve laughed at some pretty out-there right wing jokes. Funny is funny if it is true, or has an element of truth. I’d be happy to go and see a right-biased comic if he or she were funny. I mean, come on, the Labor Party, the Greens, hippies, ferals, Reiki practitioners, naturopaths, they’re just crying out for jokes to be made about them. They take themselves so fucking seriously.

Darlene: If the Left is devoid of a funny bone, do you think that gives leverage to the Right?

Eddie: As I said above, it gives leverage to anyone aspiring to be a right wing comic. If I look at most of the stuff I’ve written over the last year or so, it could be construed as pretty right-wing I think. Well, I hope.