

From the Borscht Belt to Seinfeld – the story of America's Jews

The *Marvelous Mrs Maisel* illustrates how comedy is the perfect medium to reflect the changing nature of Jewish American identity, says **Sascha Cohen**



If you haven't heard of *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*, don't worry. You soon will. The US TV show first aired on Amazon Prime at the end of 2017 and has been garnering accolades ever since – most recently winning top prizes at January's Golden Globes. The show, which is directed by Amy Sherman-Palladino (*Gilmore Girls*), is about a 1950s Jewish housewife-turned-comedian – but it tells two stories. The first is about the title character's relationship with her husband Joel, after he decides to leave her for his secretary. The second story is about the role of Jews in American stand-up comedy in the mid-20th century.

It's hard to overestimate the influence of Jewish comedians in the USA. A 1978 study by psychologist Samuel Janus found that while only three per cent of the US population was Jewish, Jews made up 80 per cent of professional stand-up comics.

What accounted for this? Scholars like Leo Rosten suggest the Jewish flair for comedic performance is due to our understanding that emotions are meant to be dramatised, displayed, and shared visually. But the timing of particular historical events and patterns also matters.

Many Eastern European Jews settled in American cities in the early 20th century, at the same time that vaudeville performance emerged as a popular form of entertainment – first among immigrant audiences, and then for the masses. Jews were drawn to show business because of the potential for upward mobility and because the theatre community was a space that tolerated cultural outsiders.

Jewish entertainers used humour as a balm for the anxiety associated with starting life in a new place as part of a minority group. In vaudeville acts, they played with slapstick, drag, and sometimes

blackface minstrelsy. Each act was slightly different – Fanny Brice utilised physical humour and parody, Sophie Tucker created a persona that was at once aggressively bawdy and maternal, Eddie Cantor traded in accents and mimicry, and George Burns peppered his routines with Yiddish slang.

The Jewish influence in vaudeville helped usher in American modernism, as the genre depended on an urban sensibility. The rat-a-tat verbal quips reflected the fast pace of city life, a style that contrasts with the folksy rural humour of Mark Twain and other non-Jewish American satirists. This style became a hallmark of Jewish stand-up, and permeates the dialogue of *Mrs Maisel*.

From the 1920s to the 1940s some Jewish entertainers realised a measure of fame and fortune. But as a group they remained marginalised and had to carve out their own venues for artistic expression. In the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, the summer resort town known as the 'Borscht Belt', spawned hundreds of comics who honed their skills in front of familiar crowds before moving on to Broadway, Las Vegas, and ultimately film and television. Mel Brooks, Danny Kaye, Carl Reiner, Jerry Lewis, and Billy Crystal played the Borscht Belt circuit. Buddy Hackett was known for his visual humour, Sid Caesar did character work, and Henry Youngman spouted simple one-liners. Like the early vaudevillians, these comics incorporated the traditions of Yiddish theatre, such as wordplay, self-deprecation and ridicule, into their routines. The appearance of stock Jewish archetypes – inept losers and clumsy neurotics – persisted, and new ones were

added, most notably the 'Jewish mother.' Catskill comics were not women-friendly.

The cultural shifts of the 1950s transformed the landscape for Jewish entertainers. American Jews moved from urban immigrant ghettos to white middle-class suburbs, and staked out their share of the country's increasing prosperity. The younger generation assimilated into the dominant culture, foregoing Jewish religious education in favour of secular public schooling and identifying as Americans first and ethnic/religious minorities second. This acculturation process mirrored the larger trend towards homogeneity in America, facilitated in part by television, which exposed every household to the same ideas and images.

However, there was ambivalence among Jews about joining the ranks of the affluent. In *Mrs Maisel*, Miriam's father-in-law, Moishe, doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of Jews employing household servants. "In ancient times, we were the slaves," he observes. Moreover, some Jews rejected the social and political conformity of the decade, preferring instead to challenge authority, phoniness, and self-righteousness. Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce were the embodiment of this new attitude.

Sahl and Bruce both got their start in San Francisco. Sahl's topical satire stood out from the goyish 'cowboy humour' of contemporaries such as Will Rogers. Bruce, who appears as a character in several episodes of *Mrs Maisel*, became notorious for pushing the boundaries of free speech. Both used comedy as a vehicle for exposing uncomfortable truths about topics such as corruption, racism and censorship.

"The major comedy clubs were created by Jews"

This brand of comedy remained popular in the 1960s, especially among members of the counterculture. As the years went by, a steady decline in American antisemitism meant that mainstream audiences were more likely to embrace Jewish acts than ever before, and comedians such as Woody Allen built successful careers.

The 1970s have been dubbed the 'Golden Age' of American stand-up, due to the explosion of comedy clubs in cities across the country, where newcomers could experiment with edgy material. The major clubs were created by Jews: Mitzi Shore ran the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, Rick Newman opened *Catch a Rising Star* in New York, and in Hollywood, Jamie Masada started the *Laugh Factory*, the first club where unknown comics could 'split the door' fees. Stand-ups who rose to prominence include Richard Lewis, whose material was autobiographical and delivered in a stream-of-consciousness style, Richard Belzer, who was known for his ad-libbing, and Andy Kaufman, who pulled Dadaist stunts such as inviting women to wrestle him on stage.

As for Jewish women, they had always been active in stand-up, but for decades struggled to achieve the same level of stardom as their male counterparts, for reasons of sexism and prudery that *Mrs Maisel* addresses. Although Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers had managed to thrive in this boys' club, they represented the exceptions until the 1970s. Just as the American feminist movement opened doors for women in education, business and sports, it also helped audiences and bookers see them as (almost) equally capable of being funny. Gilda Radner, Lily Tomlin, and Elaine Boosler began to get noticed during this period, although without commanding the same salaries as their male peers. As Boosler once remarked, the difference between a male comic and a female one was "about ten thousand [dollars] a week".

By the 1980s, popular comedy moved away from social issues and found humour in everyday situations – a shift in content exemplified by Jerry Seinfeld. Jewish stand-ups continued to thrive during the 1990s and early 2000s on stage and screen, and were unafraid of foregrounding their ethnic background. Today they no longer represent the majority, as stand-up has become more racially diverse than ever before. But their role in creating the genre, and using it as a form of mediation between Jewish and American culture, lives on. ■

The Marvelous Mrs Maisel is on Amazon Prime. See: amazon.co.uk. **Sascha Cohen** is completing her doctoral dissertation on the history of gender and American comedy at Brandeis University. She writes for *Time*, *Vice*, *Playboy* and *The Forward* amongst other publications.

COURTESY OF AMAZON.COM & EPK.TV; RUTHBLOCH



Me and Mrs Maisel

What's it like to be a female Jewish stand-up comic today? **Rachel Creeger** compares notes with her 1950s TV *doppelgänger*

Comedy. It's no job for a nice Jewish girl. And I should know. I'm literally 50 per cent of the practising Orthodox Jewish comedians in the UK and the only one performing in as many pubs and clubs as synagogues and charity functions. I'm a kosher-eating, hair-covering Jewish mother who won't perform on Shabbat or festivals. This is probably not the job my parents dreamt for me as they dandled their newborn on their knees and bottle-fed me chicken soup. I can't imagine my grandparents' prayers for me including "And may they not be glassed by a drunken stag party in a dodgy bar on a Sunday night". Although in fairness you can see worse behaviour at a standard shul Kiddush, especially if they've put out the good fishballs.

As a modern Orthodox female stand-up I am a novelty and am subjected to intense questioning. Just now there is one question I'm being asked more than any other: "Have you seen *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*?" Amazon's show opens with a 1950s family preparing for their Yom Kippur break-fast dinner. Miriam 'Midge' Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan) is a mother of two married to Joel, a hobbyist open-mic comedian, living the life expected of her. But Joel turns out to be a cheat – and not just with his secretary. Worst of all, he is not funny.

Midge's response is to get drunk on Kiddush wine and head down to the comedy club to bare her soul and a bit more besides. It turns out that she is a naturally gifted comic. The manager, Susie, convinces her to make a go of this malarkey. We follow Midge as she becomes a modern woman, with a secret life as a cross between Joan

Rivers and Katherine Ryan.

It's a very funny show. The writing is witty and the performances are strong. But I'm not sure that *Mrs Maisel* and I have much in common. My husband is supportive, his humour is entirely original and as far as I know he doesn't even have a secretary. I actually like my kids – touring away from them is a huge price to pay for following my passion from hobby to career. And I've never made a scene in shul (unless I was getting paid for it).

However, there is one scene in episode 7 which I identified with strongly because it has a profoundly Jewish, female and comedic crossover. We watch Midge as she hones a "tight 10": your first 10 minutes of laugh-hitting material which you tout from club to club as an open spot on the route to paid work. It's a two-minute montage of her taking

a premise and playing with it, taking a word out and adding another in, switching the order of the sentences, adding a third adjective or a different noun. It's a beautiful, realistic example of the prep comedians do when they're working on new material that will eventually feel spontaneous and exciting.

The process reminds me of the Jewish concept of 'teshuva', of making something right by changing not just the words and behaviour but also your internal self, so that the next time you're in the same position, everything about you is different and the choices you make fit the moment. It encapsulates everything that is wonderful about *Mrs Maisel*. ■

Rachel Creeger is a writer, director and comedian. See: www.rachelcreeger.com