Outside Looking In: Stand-Up Comedy, Rebellion, and Jewish Identity in Early Post-World War II America

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Abstract:
Before the “sick” comedians arrived onto the comedy landscape political and culturally based humor was considered taboo, but the 1950s witnessed a dramatic transformation to the art of stand-up comedy. The young comedians, including Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, became critical of American Cold War policies and the McCarthyistic culture that loomed over the nation’s society. The new stand-up comics tapped into a growing subculture of beatniks and the younger generation at large that rebelled against the conservative ideals that dominated the early post-war decade by performing politically and socially laced commentary on stage in venues that these groups frequented. The two comedians that best represent this comedic era are Jewish comics Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Their comedy was more politically oriented than the other “sick” comics, and they started an entertainment revolution with their new style. They became legendary by challenging the status quo during a historically conservative time, and inspired numerous comics to take the stage and question basic Cold War assumptions about race, gender, and communism.

Description:
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“Right up until World War II,” says Waxman, “the American Zionist movement failed to gain mass support among American Jews and encountered a lot of resistance from the (mostly German-Jewish) leadership of American Jewry who were concerned that Zionism might jeopardize the position of American Jews by calling their national allegiance into question.” Louis Brandeis, a Boston lawyer and later an associate justice of the Supreme Court, leader of the Federation of American Zionists from 1914-1921, argued that Zionism was the solution for European Jews who faced persecution and homelessness. In other words, Jewish communities in America are not immune to the melting-pot effect. That and tradition are two places to start looking. In his new book, Yascha Mounk explores Jewish identity in Modern Germany. As a result, “the simplest interaction between Jew and Gentile [can] degenerate into a politically correct comedy of errors.” In addition to careful philo-Semitism, Mounk identifies “resentment against the country’s supposed obsession with the past—a resentment that is voiced especially loudly by younger Germans.” His Jewish identity, built up from the outside in Germany, is allowed to recede from within in New York. Mounk’s story is one of globalized identity-formation: of multinational allegiance and dispersal of home, where a sense of belonging can be found and allegiance chosen, not imposed.