

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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Mort Sahl

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2018**

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In this oral history, stand-up comedy pioneer Mort Sahl recounts his life, career, passions, and disappointments. Born in Montreal in 1927, Mort grew up primarily in Los Angeles. After graduating from USC, Mort moved up to the Bay Area and soon after started his career in stand-up comedy at the legendary hungry i nightclub in San Francisco. Mort discusses his rise to national fame in the entertainment business, which led him to meet many notable people, including the likes of John F. Kennedy for whom he wrote speeches during the 1960 presidential campaign. Mort discusses his three marriages and the tragic early death of his son. 91 years old when this oral history was conducted, Mort recounts how he moved to Mill Valley from Los Angeles just a decade earlier after doing some performances at the Throckmorton Theatre. Throughout this oral history Mort uninhibitedly shares his views on life, culture, politics, and various other subjects, revealing a singular personality.

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Oral History of Mort Sahl
May 25, 2018

Editor's note: The following transcript is based on a recorded interview and has been edited for clarity and accuracy.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is May 25th, 2018. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm sitting here on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, quite pleased to finally be sitting with the remarkable Mort Sahl. Mort, how do I even begin to describe the depth and breadth of who you are? You've been around for a good long while. You've seen more than most people see in 10 lifetimes, and you are a beloved and treasured Mill Valley local.

0:00:40 Mort Sahl: I appointed myself a lifeguard, excuse me, to save America. Because between the political lies and the press being bought and the penetration of the intelligence agencies, I took a long chance and I said, "If you tell the audience the truth, they will respond." And they did. I went to the hungry i 64 years ago, for \$75 for one week, and I told the audience the truth and that caught on.¹ And I was signed by CBS, and I was eventually at NBC. I started Woody Allen and Jonathan Winters and George Carlin and Dick Cavett. I created and revealed an appetite for the facts and it got dangerous and it got brutal. And eventually I was on the staff of Jim Garrison, when he investigated the death of Kennedy and attributed it to the government, and that made some people think I was unpopular. But I was getting closer to the heart of America, and my hope, coming out of tremendous poverty, you can't imagine Los Angeles — it resulted in changing the face of comedy. And I don't mean that immodestly.

0:02:36: The American people wanted to hear it and they did. The same people that are following his presidency, followed Roosevelt. So, I believe in this country, I thought it was a rescue operation. I'm very serious about the business of comedy. My mission, oriented like a lifeguard, and it worked to my benefit and to my heartbreak. I was married three times. And every time I thought that was the time, but people want you to be so brave and then they jump ship. It's a primary thing with me. Plus, my optimism came from my mother. She really thought you could change the world. Well, she thought love can change the world too. I still believe that.

0:03:39: So, as much as I believe the political manifesto, I believe in Johnny Mercer's songs and I believe in Stan Kenton's orchestra. He was as good as my father. I believe in jazz and it liberated me. Even to a point where in my biography my ex-wife said every time I took her to see that, it was an ordeal. But that's a lie, meant to hurt me, 'cause she took, what I held most dear and tried to puncture it. It's not true. She enjoyed that band, but she knows it's the dearest thing to me, so she misrepresents it. And if the women are in trouble in this country — theoretically they are, according to feminism. But I think it's a lie. I think they don't know how well off they are. Freud said a woman who claims an inferior position renounces her superiority.

¹ The hungry i was a nightclub in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. It played an important role in the development of stand-up comedy.—Editor.

0:05:05: Freud was a real hero. I mean he really went to where the heart of problem was. Then the problem professionally [for me] was to translate what sounds deadly serious into deadly hilarious. So the audience decided I wasn't kidding. I started in the right city, San Francisco. And then they absconded with it to Los Angeles, New York, Boston. I went all around. I hold the attendance record in every club I ever worked in, and everybody predicted doom. You'll be in trouble if you tell the truth. But the truth is the only thing that makes you free.

0:05:55 Debra Schwartz: So Sahl —

0:05:56 Mort Sahl: Makes you lonesome too.

0:05:58 Debra Schwartz: Makes you lonesome. Even just talking right now, describing a quick overview of your experiences and your observations, you have your hand over your heart a lot of the time. It seems that you feel the things that you see and the things that you talk about. I would like to ask you a few questions about your family to understand a little bit more about you, how you came about, and then I'd like to travel through time with you and go into a little more detail about the very things that you're talking about. It seems as you're describing yourself right now that you are the vanguard of truth in comedy.

0:06:53 Mort Sahl: I believed in everything I saw at the movies. I was a screenwriter too, and I wrote 22 pictures that I know about. But I really believed that if you were noble, you were going to win true love and that love would triumph. All those things drove me, all those unreal things. I believe if they could write a romance, I don't think there's too much talent around that, but I think if you could conceive a romance that you'd have a successful movie, 'cause women are still looking for it and they drag the guys to the theater. They're basically in control, but of course they can't admit to it because of this pop psychology.

0:07:47 Debra Schwartz: Well, let's talk about you just now. Will you tell me a little bit about your family? Where's your family from? Let's go back a couple of generations with your grandparents on both your parents' sides.

0:08:02 Mort Sahl: It's pretty sketchy. You know, I didn't write to ancestry.com.

0:08:08 Debra Schwartz: Where were you born? Tell me where you were born?

0:08:10 Mort Sahl: Montreal.

0:08:11 Debra Schwartz: In Montreal, Canada?

0:08:12 Mort Sahl: Yeah, that's where my mother was from.

0:08:14 Debra Schwartz: And what is your mother's name?

0:08:15 Mort Sahl: What'd she do?

0:08:18 Debra Schwartz: What was your mother's name?

0:08:20 Mort Sahl: Dorothy.

0:08:20 Debra Schwartz: Dorothy?

0:08:21 Mort Sahl: Schwartz.

0:08:22 Debra Schwartz: Dorothy Schwartz?

0:08:25 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And I think they were Romanians. Her father owned the city of Montreal. He was a very aspiring guy. My dad's family, they came from Lithuania, and they all went into business successfully. He wanted to be a writer and he wrote.

0:08:54 Debra Schwartz: He came from Lithuania to where, what city?

0:08:58 Mort Sahl: Stamford, Connecticut.

0:09:00 Debra Schwartz: What year, do you know?

0:09:03 Mort Sahl: Well, no.

0:09:07 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm. What year were you born, Mort?

0:09:09 Mort Sahl: '27.

0:09:10 Debra Schwartz: 1927?

0:09:10 Mort Sahl: Yeah. In Montreal. Then my dad had a job in Washington and went there. Then he moved to Los Angeles. We went out there when I was seven, in utter poverty, only dreaming, but persistently.

0:09:35 Debra Schwartz: But your family came from wealth in Montreal, I mean your mother's father, Schwartz, right?

0:09:43 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:09:46 Debra Schwartz: He owned Montreal?

0:09:46 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:09:47 Debra Schwartz: So she married your father?

0:09:49 Mort Sahl: Yeah, so let me tell you about them.

0:09:53 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:09:53 Mort Sahl: He put an ad in a poetry magazine and he said, “Is there still a woman out there that would like to meet a dreamer?” And she answered the ad.
[chuckles]

0:10:03 Debra Schwartz: In a poetry magazine?

0:10:05 Mort Sahl: Yeah. *Poetry Magazine* was the name of the magazine. She took the train to Los Angeles and they got married in three days.

0:10:16 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:10:17 Mort Sahl: And she believed in love her entire life. “I don’t want you to be alone. I don’t want you to —” And of course, I wound up alone, even though I went through the motions. You know I married the girl in Berkeley, and my second wife was a Chinese girl, who was the head of the Playboy Bunnies. She trained them in 19 clubs. Her brother was the sheriff in New Orleans, and the assistant to the leader of the House of Representatives, Hale Boggs.

0:10:57 Debra Schwartz: Let’s back up just a bit. So your father’s a dreamer and your mother’s a romantic.

0:11:08 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:11:10 Debra Schwartz: I mean, she took a leap of faith going from Montreal to LA to meet a man who defines himself as a dreamer, maybe one of the last ones.

0:11:24 Mort Sahl: Yeah, very much so.

0:11:25 Debra Schwartz: And so they married within three days. How many siblings do you have?

0:11:35 Mort Sahl: None.

0:11:37 Debra Schwartz: You’re an only child.

0:11:38 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:11:40 Debra Schwartz: The product of a dreamer and a romantic.

0:11:42 Mort Sahl: And my father’s family was not family oriented. We didn’t visit any cousins. We lived in a kind of poverty.

0:11:54 Debra Schwartz: Where did you live in LA?

0:11:56 Mort Sahl: Downtown, Mexican area, Figueroa and Sunset. I went to Belmont High School with Richard Crenna. [chuckles]

0:12:10 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm. The actor?

0:12:11 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And we both were kids dreaming about everything, in abject poverty, you know \$25 a month apartment. I used to go up on the roof where I could be alone and dream of whatever I dreamed about. I went to USC, but I didn't believe any of it. I hung out at nightclubs at night and listened to jazz.

0:12:44 Debra Schwartz: You went to USC. Did you graduate from there?

0:12:46 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:12:47 Debra Schwartz: What year did you enter and leave?

0:12:50 Mort Sahl: I went in in '47, I graduated in '50.

0:12:56 Debra Schwartz: And what did you study while you were there?

0:13:00 Mort Sahl: Street traffic engineering and street management. [chuckles]

0:13:03 Debra Schwartz: Street traffic engineering?

0:13:04 Mort Sahl: Yeah, wanted to keep my father happy. [chuckles]

0:13:05 Debra Schwartz: What did you —

0:13:06 Mort Sahl: Obviously I didn't follow it.

0:13:08 Debra Schwartz: You were the good boy going to school, but the real you was going to clubs?

0:13:16 Mort Sahl: Well, this was Roosevelt's G.I. Bill. I got \$65 a month, and I lived at home, free books, free tuition. I hung around the clubs all night and listened to bands, just sat in the corner and drank water. And that's where I became enamored of Stan Kenton.

0:13:38 Debra Schwartz: Of who?

0:13:39 Mort Sahl: Stan Kenton's Orchestra.

0:13:41 Debra Schwartz: Stan Kenton.

0:13:42 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And he was powerful all his life. Eventually when I became successful, I hired him at the Flamingo in Vegas and at the Crescendo. We broke the house record on Sunset Boulevard. So I got a wide acquaintanceship in jazz, and it still is the only thing that moves me dramatically and it speaks to me.

0:14:15 Debra Schwartz: What does it say?

0:14:18 Mort Sahl: It's a defiance. This is what we believe. It's like a way of life. There was nobody like Stan Kenton. He changed everything. Very paternal, very commanding. And he'd never say goodnight; he'd say, "Straight ahead." [chuckles] He was really 6'5", and I was starving. He always made sure he fed me.

0:14:51 Debra Schwartz: Because you were one of his dedicated fans, he respected that?

0:14:56 Mort Sahl: I came down there one night, and the band manager said, "Would you like to meet him?" I said, "Yeah." And he came over and said, "Stan." I was perspiring. I was so scared and everything. And before he said my name, Kenton said, "I know this guy. He comes every night." Then I started to bring the girls to see him, and they all rejected it. It's too loud. So I rejected them. I went back alone. I never was with a girl that really heard it. They had other priorities. I was married a long time. I'm not a hit and run artist. The girl in Berkeley was studying psychology, and we were married 25 years.

0:15:46 Debra Schwartz: Now, how old are you when you were going to hear the music in LA?

0:15:51 Mort Sahl: About 19.

0:15:54 Debra Schwartz: And when did you move to Berkeley?

0:15:58 Mort Sahl: When I was about 22. She came up here, so I followed her. She roomed with two other girls, and I slept on a window seat.

0:16:09 Debra Schwartz: So she came to go to UC Berkeley?

0:16:11 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:16:12 Debra Schwartz: To study psychology?

0:16:13 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:16:13 Debra Schwartz: And what's her name? Who is this mysterious woman?

0:16:16 Mort Sahl: Susan Babior, B-A-B-I-O-R.

0:16:20 Debra Schwartz: So you followed Susan to Berkeley, where she was studying.

0:16:23 Mort Sahl: That's right.

0:16:24 Debra Schwartz: And you slept on the window —

0:16:26 Mort Sahl: On the window seat. And she said to me one day, "You have to try this. The comedy." She said, "Because if you don't, you're going to blame me all your life while you work in some office, and if you succeed, we're going to have a pretty good lifestyle. But I'm not going to stand in the way of it." So I said, "Where will I go?" She said, "Go to the hungry i." I said, "What if they don't laugh?" She said, "They'll say it's whimsical comedy." [chuckles]

0:17:02 Debra Schwartz: She sounds like a very interesting woman. She saw your potential.

0:17:09 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:17:09 Debra Schwartz: What is it that she saw in you that led her to believe that you certainly would be successful?

0:17:17 Mort Sahl: I don't know. Passion, I guess. And we were really in love when we got married. I broke through, and Dave Brubeck was breaking through at the Black Hawk at Turk and Hyde.

0:17:31 Debra Schwartz: At Turk and what?

0:17:33 Mort Sahl: Turk and Hyde, in the city.

0:17:34 Debra Schwartz: Oh, the Black Hawk at Turk and Hyde.

0:17:36 Mort Sahl: Then we went to the Monterey Jazz Festival and she and I got married in Carmel. I was like 26, and she was like 21. She graduated in psychology, and she's still in the East Bay.

0:18:03 Debra Schwartz: She's still in the East Bay. Will you spell her first name?

0:18:08 Mort Sahl: Susan.

0:18:09 Debra Schwartz: Oh, just plain Susan. I can spell that.

0:18:13 Mort Sahl: B-A-B-I-O-R.

0:18:15 Debra Schwartz: B-A-B-I-O-R. So Susan saw the potential of your wit and your observations and your passion.

0:18:28 Mort Sahl: I succeeded at the hungry i. I stayed there for years.

0:18:33 Debra Schwartz: Tell me what your first experience at the hungry i was like. What did you talk about? Do you remember?

0:18:38 Mort Sahl: I picked up the *Chronicle* and I went through the news.

0:18:42 Debra Schwartz: So you simply ad-libbed it. You picked up the *Chronicle* and you looked at the news and you just started talking.

0:18:48 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And it wasn't so successful. She packed a lot of students the first night, but after that I was on my own. I somehow hung on. And finally, Herb Caen got a letter: "If you're Mr. San Francisco, why haven't you picked up on this kid?" And that letter was from my mother, who lived over I Sutter Street. So he did come down, and he did pick up on us, and we were married in his house, at Pierce and Scott.

0:19:32 Debra Schwartz: Wait, wait, wait, I'm confused. So you're at the hungry i?

0:19:37 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:19:37 Debra Schwartz: And there's a buzz starting about you. Is it every night that you're picking up the newspaper and making commentary?

0:19:47 Mort Sahl: Yeah, right out of the paper.

0:19:49 Debra Schwartz: So, there's a buzz about you. I mean, how many comedians, or whatever you are, start their act reading the newspaper? What gave you that idea?

0:20:02 Mort Sahl: Because I couldn't remember the jokes, I wrote them on a paper.

0:20:06 Debra Schwartz: So you would —

0:20:06 Mort Sahl: But I couldn't see the paper out there, so I decided to throw it away and do what occurred to me. And then it began to be quoted, and that's when the political figures began to contact me.

0:20:23 Debra Schwartz: So Herb Caen gets sniff of you and he says, "If you're in San Francisco, how come you don't know about this guy Mort Sahl?"

0:20:31 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And he went down there and then eventually I got to know him and I got married in his house.

0:20:37 Debra Schwartz: So you married Susan at his house?

0:20:39 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:20:40 Debra Schwartz: And you said something about your mother?

0:20:43 Mort Sahl: Pardon me?

0:20:43 Debra Schwartz: Did you say your mother was living on Sutter?

0:20:46 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:20:46 Debra Schwartz: So your mother had moved from Montreal to be with you in San Francisco?

0:20:50 Mort Sahl: No, I moved them from LA. They were in LA.

0:20:52 Debra Schwartz: Oh, in LA rather. So your parents were both living in LA. You just moved them...

0:21:03 Mort Sahl: I brought them up, yeah.

0:21:04 Debra Schwartz: As your success started to build, you had enough money.

0:21:07 Mort Sahl: She *kvelled* and my father wasn't so sure.

0:21:11 Debra Schwartz: *Kvelled*? That's a Yiddish word, yes?

0:21:14 Mort Sahl: Hell, yeah!

0:21:15 Debra Schwartz: What does that mean? For the people that are listening.

0:21:17 Mort Sahl: Well, there's nothing like Yiddish. I don't know how psychiatrists work without it. [laughs] It's so precise.

0:21:25 Debra Schwartz: What is *kvelled*?

0:21:29 Mort Sahl: A verb for being overjoyed, really. I suppose some psychiatrists, the old ones, the ones that were communists — the new ones are dispensing pills, I guess.

0:21:45 Debra Schwartz: So your mother saw that her unique son now, has his own unique voice and he's being listened to. What mother could wish for more?

0:21:58 Mort Sahl: Oh, it went on like that. Eventually, after I knew Kennedy, I knew Johnson, I took my father to the White House, and he liked Johnson. [laughs] And I said, "You're destroying everything I built!" But the joke was lost, of course, on that audience.

0:22:23 Debra Schwartz: So you're living in San Francisco, and you're at the hungry i and you've got a buzz going about you, you've got an audience building, and you've got your parents —

0:22:32 Mort Sahl: Yeah, then I got signed by CBS.

0:22:34 Debra Schwartz: And then how did that happen?

0:22:36 Mort Sahl: Herb Caen brought in the president of CBS. They brought me to LA, and they signed Johnny Carson and me. They didn't know what to do with me. So I didn't change, I wouldn't change anything. And they were all cynical: "The audience won't understand. It's too intellectual. It's too political." But I know better about the American people. "They were longing to be free," to paraphrase Lincoln. And I kept going. Then I got a call from a Joe Kennedy, and he said, "I understand you're the master, you can remove Nixon's third rib, but you won't stab him with a stiletto."

0:23:37 Debra Schwartz: Wait, say that again. Joe Kennedy says what to you?

0:23:42 Mort Sahl: That, "You have the skill to remove Nixon's third rib, but you don't use a stiletto. And I'd like you to work for my son, Johnny."

0:23:53 Debra Schwartz: Meaning you used your voice, not any kind of violence?

0:23:57 Mort Sahl: No, to write the speeches.

0:23:58 Debra Schwartz: Oh, so he wanted you to be the speechwriter for his upcoming —

0:24:02 Mort Sahl: Yeah. So, I did, I met the people around him. And at another juncture I can tell you which ones he could trust. You know when he made his inauguration speech, do you recall he had Robert Frost there?

0:24:17 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:24:18 Mort Sahl: Frost wrote him a note, and he said, "Beware of any men in your court young King." Which he did. And they thought I was clever but unstable, because I liked them. But I really liked Castro and Che Guevara. They couldn't figure it out. And I already knew Adlai Stevenson. And I knew Eugene McCarthy, because they'd all heard the material as I went through those cities.

0:24:52 Debra Schwartz: So, by now you're on tour, you're going from place to place, your pollinating the country.

0:24:58 Mort Sahl: Yeah, and I held the attendance record in every club, Boston, New York —

0:25:00 Debra Schwartz: You're pollinating the country with your critical analysis.

0:25:05 Mort Sahl: Skeptical, yeah.

0:25:06 Debra Schwartz: Skeptical analysis. You're challenging —

0:25:10 Mort Sahl: And then I called Sue, and I said, "I'm back with a sack full of money, and awards and everything. Can you meet me at the 3 o'clock plane?" She said, "No, I have a class. I'm a person too." That was the beginning of the schism.

0:25:28 Debra Schwartz: Okay. So, your lives are running slightly different courses, but you're out there working.

0:25:39 Mort Sahl: I had the work.

0:25:40 Debra Schwartz: Were you ever surprised to find yourself suddenly in these various arenas, simply just communicating in the way that you wanted to?

0:25:52 Mort Sahl: No. I knew that subconsciously people agreed with me, and I'd found a way to phrase it, to help them in. And then by that time I moved to Los Angeles, and I knew everybody. I knew Steve McQueen, and I knew Paul Newman. These are guys I knew intimately. And William Holden and Sam Peckinpah. And I was forming my own way of thinking. They were all living out at the beach, and buying sports cars and everything. She was up here becoming a psychologist. And then I moved on through a bunch of actresses and everything. And then Hefner introduced me to the Bunny, China.

0:26:38 Debra Schwartz: China, your second wife?

0:26:40 Mort Sahl: Yeah, second wife. And that went on for 25 years.

0:26:44 Debra Schwartz: So, your first wife was how many years was that again?

0:26:50 Mort Sahl: About three years.

0:26:52 Debra Schwartz: Three years for your first wife.

0:26:53 Mort Sahl: And she stayed here. She never wanted to go back to LA.

0:26:56 Debra Schwartz: So, three years with your first wife. And then you met China, in what year?

0:27:04 Mort Sahl: I met her, well, let's see — I don't remember the year.

0:27:12 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember what you were wearing?

0:27:13 Mort Sahl: I was working in Chicago at Mister Kelly's.

0:27:17 Debra Schwartz: That's where the original first Heff club was in Chicago, correct?

0:27:22 Mort Sahl: A big club.

0:27:23 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. Let's just go back a little bit. I hesitate to walk away from Joe Kennedy just yet. Will you talk a little bit about Joe Kennedy, what kind of person you found him to be, the Kennedys?

0:27:37 Mort Sahl: Well, he was a fascist and he believed that Hitler was going to win and said so. And he played cards with William O. Douglas, do you remember him in the Supreme Court? Roosevelt nominated him. And Kennedy said to him during a poker game, "I believe Hitler's going to win, and I think Roosevelt's a dictator. I'm a Catholic, and you're an atheist." And he said, "I must be crazy to be your friend. Am I crazy?" And Douglas said to him, "Based on the evidence, you're crazy." A great man, Douglas, just like Henry Wallace, a great visionary. Also Eugene McCarthy, whom I had the pleasure of knowing intimately, and Stevenson. It was very abundant, even when the Democrats from Mill Valley act like they're serving prison time, they had some great prophets among them. And I got to know them.

0:28:45 Debra Schwartz: So, Joe Kennedy who you describe as a fascist hires a Jewish kid from California to be a speech writer for his son.

0:28:56 Mort Sahl: Because he thought it would be useful. And it was. I did a lot of work for them. For nothing I might add.

0:29:03 Debra Schwartz: For nothing.

0:29:04 Mort Sahl: Nothing, not only nothing, but when he was elected, there's real irony in what you're doing. When he was elected, he never paid me, and I was flying to rallies with the likes of Lauren Bacall and Myrna Loy.

0:29:24 Debra Schwartz: Bringing your people in.

0:29:26 Mort Sahl: And writing his speeches, and when he got elected, we had a big party in New York with Paul Newman and Cliff Robertson, the whole Broadway crowd, Gore Vidal. And I am seated with Stevenson at the Morosco Theatre. They never thanked me, they never paid me, they didn't invite me to the inauguration. And although I got along well with the president, they didn't, as I say, didn't invite me. And then afterward, when I did some jokes about Kennedy, the old man told everybody not to hire me, which was the first time I'd encountered that resistance and they didn't. He was out to kill me. He was really unforgiving.

0:30:23: And came up empty, if you're a religious person. They killed those kids, and he didn't do anything. And where was I? I was with Jim Garrison the D.A. of New

Orleans looking for the guys that killed them, and named them on the air. I named them on the Carson show. I said, “The CIA killed the president.” I made a lot of enemies, and I had a few people listening, religiously.

0:30:52 Debra Schwartz: Why did you stay with the Kennedys? You were paying your own airfare and you were bringing in your Hollywood and your acting crowd? This you were doing, why? What motivated you to stay there, if you were basically unsupported?

0:31:04 Mort Sahl: Well, the old man had asked me to take the job and —

0:31:09 Debra Schwartz: It’s not really a job ’cause you’re not getting paid.

0:31:11 Mort Sahl: Yeah, we didn’t say anything about the money. I’m not a kind of guy that brings that up. But my manager, who was Lawford’s manager as well —

0:31:25 Debra Schwartz: Peter Lawford, the actor.

0:31:26 Mort Sahl: He said, “Well, you’re going to be a king. You know Stevenson, you know a president.” Well, I was far from a king, but they should’ve known. Their responsibility was to know that I’m an unbridled spirit. I’m going to report whatever I see. I didn’t like any of the crowd around him, Arthur Schlesinger and the national security advisor and that tall guy that he made the ambassador to India. I didn’t like the whole crowd, but he was all right.

0:32:02 Debra Schwartz: Who was all right?

0:32:03 Mort Sahl: The president.

0:32:04 Debra Schwartz: John Kennedy.

0:32:05 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And they removed him when he started to fight with the CIA. So that got me into the other thing with Garrison. I felt it should be told, that we’d be vindicated, and Garrison was really brave. The Oliver Stone movie is a fake. I think Oliver Stone is a fake, but that’s another issue.

0:32:31 Debra Schwartz: Did you read David Talbot’s book *The Devil’s Chessboard*?

0:32:34 Mort Sahl: Yeah, I know Talbot. He researched a lot of that with me. He had a stroke.

0:32:40 Debra Schwartz: Yes, I have interviewed him, you can hear his —

0:32:42 Mort Sahl: Yeah, he researched a lot with me when I was working at the Razz Room. It’s idealized of course, because Bobby was pretty tough. I remember the joke too.

0:33:00 Debra Schwartz: What is the joke?

0:33:01 Mort Sahl: When they appointed Bobby as attorney general, “Little Brother is watching you.” That was the joke. I remember it.

0:33:10 Debra Schwartz: Was that your joke or —

0:33:11 Mort Sahl: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the liberals didn’t want to hear it. They wanted to hear he was noble.

0:33:17 Debra Schwartz: I must ask, you obviously had opportunity to meet remarkable people, the true makers of an era in your job that’s not really a job, your volunteer work [chuckles] with the Kennedy family in the helping of the making of America.

0:33:40 Mort Sahl: Yeah, make the jokes funny and all that stuff.

0:33:43 Debra Schwartz: But also, you’re working as a speechwriter. Did you have the ear of the president. Did you have any influence in the way that he —

0:33:52 Mort Sahl: Oh yeah. He wanted to appear sharp and anything and everything. But I must say that that show business crowd around him was only interested in introducing him to starlets. I wanted to introduce him to the opportunity to change history. A lot of idealism working there.

0:34:17 Debra Schwartz: On your part?

0:34:19 Mort Sahl: Yeah. I was at the convention, Mrs. Roosevelt said to me, “Did he give you that book, *Profiles in Courage*?” And she said to me, “Did it ever occur to you that he’s more profile than courage?” She was great. Great. The president was lucky to have her.

0:34:38 Debra Schwartz: And we’re talking about Roosevelt?

0:34:41 Mort Sahl: Yes, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. And you notice, the feminists never mention her, they mention Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan. She was really something, and so was Roosevelt.

0:34:55 Debra Schwartz: Some feminists do mention her, I have to challenge you. I took a feminism class and we read about Eleanor Roosevelt, but this was —

0:35:03 Mort Sahl: And Eugene McCarthy was something, and Adlai Stevenson was everything. I knew him well. And they treated him very badly, the Kennedy’s.

0:35:13 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so the Kennedys. Being in that world, the Kennedy world, there's this sensational — the glamor, the power, I mean they really are a family that for as long as can be have projected this fantastic image that America identifies with. How did you feel about yourself at that time, in that world?

0:35:45 Mort Sahl: Well, you always had a lot of girls, because they wanted to be invited to that stuff, so they cultivate you and I was dating a lot and everything. And then I met the Reagans, and China and I went to the Reagan White House.

0:36:09 Debra Schwartz: Your wife China, now, your second wife.

0:36:11 Mort Sahl: Yeah. But she was a Chinese gambler.

0:36:18 Debra Schwartz: China was a Chinese gambler.

0:36:19 Mort Sahl: Horses.

0:36:21 Debra Schwartz: Horses!

0:36:21 Mort Sahl: Yeah. I don't know if she ever understood what I was doing, but what I was doing, whether I was deluding myself or not, I really felt like a lifeguard. I'm going to save America. I'm going to tell the audience the truth and they're going to change things. That's where I was.

0:36:52 Debra Schwartz: That was your ideal inside.

0:36:54 Mort Sahl: Then I met Nancy Reagan, which introduced me to the Reagans, and I got along great with her. I liked it because she looked after her husband, something that really appealed to me. And by that time, I was divorcing China.

0:37:15 Debra Schwartz: This is after 25 years.

0:37:17 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

0:37:19 Debra Schwartz: So, let's just organize our time a little here. With the Kennedy this is now in the '60s, correct? What years are you with the Kennedy clan in your experiences.

0:37:29 Mort Sahl: From about '59 to the middle of his first term. I helped him mostly with the election, and Sinatra was the intermediary, he signed me to the label. Then I put out an album making a fool of Kennedy, which they became furious about.

0:37:55 Debra Schwartz: The Kennedys became furious.

0:37:57 Mort Sahl: Sinatra became furious.

0:38:01 Debra Schwartz: Oh, Sinatra.

0:38:03 Mort Sahl: But he wasn't politically sophisticated. And he was going, it was a break, he was supposed to come to Frank's house from Palm Springs, and he went to Crosby's house 'cause the old man said Sinatra is a gangster.

0:38:19 Debra Schwartz: So, John Kennedy goes to Crosby's house, because his dad has advised him against hanging out with Sinatra 'cause Sinatra is hanging out with the unsavory types in Vegas.

0:38:29 Mort Sahl: Yeah, he likes the gangsters. So I lost on all fronts, and I had a lot of trouble working.

0:38:39 Debra Schwartz: So while you're with the Kennedy clan, are you continuing to do your stand-up routines, and your commentary or have you mostly just gone to television and writing? Or what was your life like apart from the work you did with them?

0:38:55 Mort Sahl: Well, I was going back to the same clubs, going on television, but people were telling me what to say, and a lot of people were turning me down. And everything became very timid. I lost *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson; he didn't want any of that on there.

0:39:21 Debra Schwartz: He didn't want any what?

0:39:23 Mort Sahl: Any real political comment about Vietnam. I was still making it and a lot of the clubs were not available, and I went from, you know, millions of dollars a year to \$19,000, while I could work.

0:39:43 Debra Schwartz: So working with the Kennedys didn't really work out that well for you, or did it? Would you say that that was time well spent in your life?

0:39:56 Mort Sahl: Well, yeah, it was stimulating mentally. And I was a romantic, I was distracted by the girls.

0:40:07 Debra Schwartz: Romantic is the word you're using? With all those lovely women?

0:40:11 Mort Sahl: Oh, yeah. That was always a big part of my life. The promise. True love.

0:40:18 Debra Schwartz: But you're married, to China.

0:40:21 Mort Sahl: Well, I thought she'd think I'm heroic. But she had a lot of pragmatism in her. Every girl has a father and when they get married they want a better version of their father. That's really what they're looking for.

0:40:39 Debra Schwartz: You seem to know.

0:40:41 Mort Sahl: Boy was Freud right.

0:40:42 Debra Schwartz: [laughs] My goodness!

0:40:43 Mort Sahl: Man. It's always the Jewish guys that can see through the wall.

0:40:49 Debra Schwartz: It's the Jewish guys that can see through all?

0:40:52 Mort Sahl: Through the wall. They used to be. Not the new ones.

0:40:55 Debra Schwartz: Do you think you have x-ray vision?

0:40:57 Mort Sahl: Pardon me?

0:40:58 Debra Schwartz: Do you have x-ray vision?

0:41:01 Mort Sahl: Well, I don't know how smart I am, but I'm smart enough to admire the guys who are smart. Freud's really good, you know. When Adler criticizes him someone said, "Why is he so mad at you?" Freud said, "He can't forgive me for all I did for him. He's a real Jewish guy, you know? When he hits a hard note with a patient she says, 'What's the matter with you? Do you want my blood?' and he says to her, 'You're on a menstrual period.' He gets it right away. Every woman's looking for a better version of her father. And then I learned that the liberals have no courage at all.

0:41:54 Debra Schwartz: Liberals have no courage?

0:41:56 Mort Sahl: No.

0:41:57 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about that.

0:41:58 Mort Sahl: They want to go along with the crowd. In other words, it's your fault. If the writers are blacklisted, it's their fault. You know where the crowd is going, why don't you go there too? So they were mad at me and all the time they were admiring me. They were mad at me for exposing them as hypocrites. And then in order to supplement my income I started writing screenplays, 'cause I wasn't getting any work. And I met them all but they were pretty shy of courage. They're afraid they're going to lose their meal ticket.

0:42:39 Debra Schwartz: Who is this now?

0:42:40 Mort Sahl: People in the business: directors, people at the studios.

0:42:45 Debra Schwartz: Well, this is after McCarthyism, I guess they —

0:42:49 Mort Sahl: It's after that.

0:42:50 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, it's after.

0:42:52 Mort Sahl: But in other words, a guy like Sam Peckinpah is a real person. A guy like Norman Lear is not a person. He writes stereotyped people: dictatorial women. The Jeffersons are black people who never existed. And Archie Bunker, it's a fraud. We can use a man like Herbert Hoover again. All those guys voted for Roosevelt. The working class — it's a lie! When he was asked about me he said, "He's too bitter for me." I'm bitter?

0:43:30 Debra Schwartz: Who said that?

0:43:30 Mort Sahl: Lear.

0:43:31 Debra Schwartz: Norman Lear.

0:43:32 Mort Sahl: They shot the president in a car. They removed his body illegally. You're not allowed to move a dead body. And Johnson did. And he reversed all his policies and killed 58,000 people in Vietnam. And then I had to figure out, how do you make that funny? What's the vulnerability? I guess it's the people don't really like Johnson. Eventually the jokes come to you. Sometimes they come to you. For instance, Romney's father was the governor of Michigan, and he was against the war. And Nixon called him up and started yelling at him, "You gotta come out for the war." So he went to Vietnam, and General Westmoreland showed him everything and he said, "I was wrong. The war is great." Then he came back and he went on the air, on *Meet the Press* and he said, "The war is really awful. It's the worst thing we ever did, but the generals brain-washed me." And Eugene McCarthy said, "A light rinse would have done it." [laughs]

0:44:42: There's always a joke in there. There was always something they couldn't ignore. But they did a pretty good job of trying. And I kept going, because once I got a bite, I really —

0:45:00 Debra Schwartz: Did you have ever feel like you have a super power of sorts, a special gift to find the way to expose, to reveal the irony or the hypocrisy?

0:45:14 Mort Sahl: Well, yeah, but it's more like a dream. It's a dream that everybody's going to hear about the hypocrisy and get mad and change it. And obviously they haven't. They don't have the courage. Most of the women I know are living without being loved. And the men are living and pretending that the money in San Jose is enough rather than being in love with anybody. So, it's a country that's deluding itself. And then when you talk to them around here, they keep telling you about Trump. I mean, is it really one guy that could destabilize you?

0:46:03 Debra Schwartz: We'll get to Mill Valley shortly, but before we go to Mill Valley I want to back up a little to when you were talking about your efforts in comedy to reveal what's going on politically, to use your venue and your position to share the truth, to make social change. Certainly there are other comedians, like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, people you said that you knew, did you ever feel that you belonged to a brotherhood or community?

0:46:48 Mort Sahl: No.

0:46:48 Debra Schwartz: I mean George Carlin is certainly —

0:46:52 Mort Sahl: I gave him his first job in Chicago.

0:46:55 Debra Schwartz: Talk about that will you, a little? I'm a personal fan of George Carlin, so I'd love to hear your thoughts.

0:47:00 Mort Sahl: You notice what he did as he got older? He got a pony tail and black t-shirt and started to act like Lenny Bruce. He went to the colleges and said, "The country's run by rich white men playing golf." That's like throwing a bone to natives. That's not what's really wrong with this country.

0:47:22 Debra Schwartz: You said that's like "throwing a bone to natives"?

0:47:27 Mort Sahl: I said, that line about white people playing golf is like throwing a bone to a dog. The kids get a chance to rebel against the people that are paying for them to go to Wharton. It's not truthful. I don't think they all see the truth, but it's not truthful. I gave him a job, when he was working in a deli in Chicago, Eli's Delicatessen.

0:48:00 Debra Schwartz: What year is this?

0:48:02 Mort Sahl: Oh, when I was running at Mister Kelly's. I worked there for about 30 years on and off in Chicago. I found them. I put Cavett to work, and I put Woody to work. I brought everybody into the hungry i. Shelley.

0:48:19 Debra Schwartz: Shelley?

0:48:19 Mort Sahl: The only record Shelly sold, the first comedy record. I put him on there, and Nichols and May. All of them. The most talented is Winters.

0:48:35 Debra Schwartz: Jonathan Winters?

0:48:37 Mort Sahl: Who was a Republican. He was a Republican.

0:48:40 Debra Schwartz: You think of Jonathan Winters as the most talented?

0:48:41 Mort Sahl: Oh yeah, the most gifted, freest, didn't swear, saw through social hypocrisy.

0:48:50 Debra Schwartz: He pushed buttons. I remember talking to him once in Santa Barbara, and he never hesitated to say the most outrageous thing right from the get-go. It's almost like he was —

0:49:02 Mort Sahl: Yeah, he was really gifted. And the rest of them, they won't go too far out of line. You got to remember, we went from democracy with Roosevelt to fascism, and nobody said anything. What they talked about was that phony liberation rap, and the phony thing of loving negroes, which they don't. Why won't they say they don't? If they're too scared to say it, why don't they just skip it entirely?

0:49:49 Debra Schwartz: They. When you're talking about "they" —

0:49:54 Mort Sahl: The men. They say these things because they're involved, but they don't love them. They don't even understand them.

0:50:03 Debra Schwartz: When you say that they don't love them, they don't understand them, just break that down a little bit for me. What leads you to make that conclusion? What brings you to that conclusion?

0:50:15 Mort Sahl: Oh, because they do what's politically expedient. They marry people that are secure but have no capacity to love them, you know, to think about nothing but them while they're at the office in San Jose, to think of surprises for them, to look upon making love to them as something more than a chore. The materialism. And the women have gotten tougher because they're afraid the men aren't tough, and they make terrible men. This whole thing about sex changes. Men make terrible women because they don't have any insight. I know. I've been married to girls who can really see through walls, but life is nothing without love, and it doesn't come with a sex change operation.

0:51:19: My mother would always tell me that there's gotta be someone there who loves you. My mother really believed in it, and my dad was tough. He was tough, unyielding, and a loner. My mother never got discouraged. We were living in a \$25 a month apartment most of the time in Los Angeles, and I used to go to the central library because it was free. If I had ten cents, I'd go to the movies. I saw Casablanca the other night. You gotta have a yearning to believe that. There's nothing believable in the picture. [chuckles]

0:52:12: But you want to believe it. If they made what they call a chick flick now, the women would make the men go, to gently hint to them that being a romantic is a real destiny. Robert De Niro was a good actor, but he's not a romantic.

0:52:35 Debra Schwartz: Who do you admire? Who does embody what you're describing in a true sense?

0:52:43 Mort Sahl: John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Joel McCrea. The end of Peckinpah's movie *Ride the High Country*, he's an older cowboy, and he has nothing. And Randolph Scott says to him "What do you want Steve?" He says "I want to walk into my own house undiminished." I loved William Holden, as a friend. I loved McQueen because he was alive, he wasn't politically aware, but he was alive. And Ali MacGraw's a great dame. But there aren't many of them that will go to bat. Did you see the Weinstein indictment, today?

0:53:41 Debra Schwartz: No, I did not.

0:53:43 Mort Sahl: \$10 million bail. And the lawyers said, "well, he didn't invent the casting couch, your Honor." The country is bizarre. But it's not dangerous; it doesn't take any chances. The old movies are all about what I did for love. The ones I wrote were all about love redeeming everybody, and no producer had to put a gun in my hand. There was a reward for being a man and that was that girl at the end of the trail. Did you see *The Quiet Man*, did you ever see that? Wayne and Maureen O'Hara.

0:54:27 Debra Schwartz: A long time ago.

0:54:28 Mort Sahl: When he goes back to Ireland.

0:54:30 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

0:54:30 Mort Sahl: Those pictures are truthful, about what you yearn for. She walks out in the garden and she says to him, "Some farmer you turned out to be, Sean. No roses no potatoes." And he says, "No children." He says to John Wayne and the cowboys, "Mr. Anderson, you can forgive a guy that makes a mistake, can't you?" He says, "Yeah, but I can't abide a liar." It's really down there where you live, you gotta excavate for that. What do you really believe? That's why when all these tawny-haired guys from San Anselmo say "I'm a filmmaker" — that's why we have no film festival in Mill Valley. There are no pictures. You know when I got to know Robin, beyond his story on the stage, when I got to know him as a guy —

0:55:45 Debra Schwartz: Robin Williams.

0:55:46 Mort Sahl: It was really rewarding. And she's a great girl. Paints like crazy.

0:55:54 Debra Schwartz: His wife?

0:55:54 Mort Sahl: Susan.

0:55:56 Debra Schwartz: Oh, Susan.

0:55:58 Mort Sahl: Yeah, great painter but if you don't get the girl, what the hell is good in going through the movie. That's the way I feel about life. And I had a third marriage, you know.

0:56:15 Debra Schwartz: Let's talk about your third marriage.

0:56:17 Mort Sahl: I was coming back from a wake for my kid. He died at 22. No he died at 19.

0:56:24 Debra Schwartz: So you had a child with your second wife China, right?

0:56:30 Mort Sahl: Yeah, China and I had a boy and he died.

0:56:35 Debra Schwartz: He was born when?

0:56:36 Mort Sahl: We had a wake in Connecticut.

0:56:38 Debra Schwartz: When was he born?

0:56:40 Mort Sahl: He was born in '76, Bastille day.

0:56:44 Debra Schwartz: And he died at how old?

0:56:46 Mort Sahl: At 19.

0:56:47 Debra Schwartz: That's awfully young.

0:56:49 Mort Sahl: Yeah. I went to the wake and on the plane on the way back I met a stewardess whom I didn't take out for four months, and then only at a distance. And then we were married for 11 years.

0:57:13 Debra Schwartz: May I ask you about your son? That must have been very difficult.

0:57:18 Mort Sahl: Yes, the toughest thing I ever went through. He was a great kid but it's very dangerous to be a kid in America.

0:57:30 Debra Schwartz: What was your son's name?

0:57:31 Mort Sahl: Mort Jr.

0:57:32 Debra Schwartz: Mort Jr.

0:57:34 Mort Sahl: That was his mother's choice, because you know the Jews don't have any juniors.

0:57:39 Debra Schwartz: No, right you don't name a child after —

0:57:42 Mort Sahl: No, she did. And he was half-Chinese. And she had nine siblings, you know, all of whom had girls.

0:57:54 Debra Schwartz: So he was the —

0:57:55 Mort Sahl: He was the king down there in New Orleans where she was from, and he was a guy I could finally talk to.

0:58:04 Debra Schwartz: So your son, you were very close to him.

0:58:08 Mort Sahl: Oh yeah. The only kid. If I'd have had my way we would have had 10. I really liked it when I finally got to it.

0:58:14 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm. How old were you when he was born then?

0:58:16 Mort Sahl: I grew up alone and I really needed a sister to talk to. If I don't understand women, it's well grounded. I never got to talk to one and I was usually too broke to take any out. I went from broke to a lot of money, but that doesn't guarantee anything.

0:58:41 Debra Schwartz: So, your son, Mort Jr., how did he feel about the work you did, your job?

0:58:51 Mort Sahl: Oh, he was very proud of it. He was into the music. He had a rock band and he played the piano. In fact, his piano is up in Lucy's place, I brought it up here, up in the mezzanine. The work, he was ambivalent about the work. He loved Guns & Roses, and he hung around wherever they were, and he finally met them and he asked for an autograph. Axl Rose said to him, "Is your dad Mort Sahl?" He said, "Your father is a genius." And that night he treated me entirely differently. [laughs]

0:59:44 Debra Schwartz: Oh, what a moment as a parent! Those are few and far between!

0:59:48 Debra Schwartz: I got endorsed by Axl Rose!

0:59:48 Mort Sahl: I hated all the music. I hate all those guys up here with that phony bluegrass stuff. I would rather hear Dick play over at Marin Joe's on Wednesday night. I never liked the status quo. I don't like Wynton Marsalis. I never liked any of that stuff. I liked writers who broke the barriers.

1:00:20 Debra Schwartz: Do you think that your lifestyle affected your child, the son of a famous man? I don't know the conditions in which your child died, but that's awfully young for a young man to pass.

1:00:39 Mort Sahl: Well, it may have. I think everything is moving too fast for kids now anyway, and he was one of them. He was defending me all the time. I used to hear him on talk shows on radio. He was always the attorney for the defense. But it was a combustible marriage. It was hard for him; he was the only kid. I remember when she left, she started screaming “I want a divorce!” And I found out in that book that she filed seven times!

1:01:22 Debra Schwartz: Yes, I’m looking at this book, which is interesting to me that you had to read it to find out some of the things about your life. *Last Man Standing: Mort Sahl and the Birth of Modern Comedy*. I have to ask, when she was yelling she wanted a divorce, had you been living the lifestyle? I recall a time in this culture where men were quite liberal with the way they chose to be in a marriage. Fidelity may not be something that a man would be interested in, but a wife might be.

1:01:58 Mort Sahl: Well, I had a house in Beverly Hills. She decorated the whole thing and had the permission to change it every year, including the paint. And if she decided she wanted to see Florence, Italy, we went that week. That doesn’t mean that’s everything. But we can afford to indulge a lot. When the Reagans had us at the White House she could have a designer make two dresses. One night she went into Beverly Hills and the furrier there had a sale, and she came back with two mink coats and she said to me, “It was such a bargain I couldn’t turn it down.” She said, “You’re a star and your wife should look good.” And I said, “Maybe those coats will take their mind off the fact that my underwear is torn.” I made a gag out of it, which is characteristic. I didn’t care about the money. I didn’t care about the money or the settlement or anything. The shattering fact that she would keep going to those Beverly Hills lawyers, “I want to get out.” She wanted to go to the track every day.

1:03:25 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I see. Okay, so back to your son, and the time after his wake. Did this terrible calamity shake your optimism or your sense of romance or purpose in your life?

1:03:48 Mort Sahl: No. I still believed in romance, and he was exactly like me, by the way: he was always in love. He couldn’t imagine us being in love being his parents, and we really were at one time. So I went back to being a life guard and saving America, and meeting girls along the way. That’s how I met the stewardess, and she was pretty good, except she had a mother who would discount her, a southern mother in Atlanta, and a terrible kid. A dreadful kid who is 29 now and has never had a job.

1:04:29 Debra Schwartz: And your third wife’s name?

1:04:32 Mort Sahl: Kenslea.

1:04:33 Debra Schwartz: Kenslea?

1:04:34 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

1:04:35 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

1:04:36 Mort Sahl: A terrible kid.

1:04:38 Debra Schwartz: Well, tell us what you really think Mort.

1:04:40 Mort Sahl: I mean really, really dangerous, looks like Lady Gaga. It wasn't worth a trip, and then life took a turn on coming up here. I was teaching in Claremont. I was on the faculty.

1:05:00 Debra Schwartz: And what were you teaching?

1:05:01 Mort Sahl: A course on the assassination, one on screen-writing, and a course called "The Revolutionary's Handbook," about what do you do if you're a rebel and you've got to support a family.

1:05:16 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh, I wouldn't have taken that class! [laughs]

1:05:18 Mort Sahl: So I taught those three courses, and then I found out that the whole place was full of Republicans who had to have a job, people like David Gergen, and it was awful.

1:05:33 Debra Schwartz: So you didn't think this going into Claremont College?

1:05:37 Mort Sahl: No, because I was recruited by a Jewish guy who loved David Robert Frost. And then I got in there and I found —

1:05:51 Debra Schwartz: You're grabbing your neck, feeling a little strangle.

1:05:53 Mort Sahl: In the screenwriting course, they'd come in for notes. A girl would come in for a meeting about her script and they'd say, "Leave the door ajar if it's a female student."

1:06:08 Debra Schwartz: Oh yes

1:06:10 Mort Sahl: So then a girl would come in and every one of them was the same. They'd talk like Gloria Steinem in class, and then they'd write these love stories which mean they still desire it. He grabs her, he kisses her, she loves him. I said, "Why does she love him? Why? Well, it's natural," I said. "Why is it natural? How many times have you been in love, really in love?" And that caused a ruckus in the campus. Meanwhile Lucy —

1:06:49 Debra Schwartz: Lucy Mercer.

1:06:50 Mort Sahl: Hired me to come into the Throckmorton and it sold out in about an hour. I came up there and filled it and she brought me back. The big theater.

1:07:03 Debra Schwartz: So Lucy must have been a fan.

1:07:06 Mort Sahl: Yeah, she liked it, and I went on the stage and had a big audience and she brought me back. Then Kenslea and I got divorced. I was so disappointed and everything that I got out of LA.

1:07:30 Debra Schwartz: You got what?

1:07:32 Mort Sahl: I got out. I said to Lucy. She met me in LA. I had dinner with her and I said I'm getting out of here and starting again. And she said, "Where you going to go?" I said, "Well, that depends. The house is sold, and that kid has destroyed my credit." [chuckles] And Lucy said, "I own an apartment house."

1:08:05 Debra Schwartz: She owns an apartment house?

1:08:08 Mort Sahl: So, I took one blazer, and one pair of gray pants, and two blue shirts, and got on a plane and came up here. And just started that, living in —

1:08:19 Debra Schwartz: This is what year?

1:08:22 Mort Sahl: 10 and a half years ago.

1:08:24 Debra Schwartz: 10 and a half years ago. Okay, so let's just summarize this. You've jumped again into a love affair. You've married someone. How long after your son's passing did you — you waited a while to date, but then you eventually did decide to marry, and then how long did you stay married for?

1:08:48 Mort Sahl: To Kenslea?

1:08:49 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

1:08:49 Mort Sahl: Oh, several years.

1:08:51 Debra Schwartz: Several years.

1:08:53 Mort Sahl: Yeah, 'cause the kid came when she was nine, and the kid was well into her 20s when I left.

1:09:01 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so you had a good long run with the third marriage. And you're getting older at this point.

1:09:08 Mort Sahl: Yeah, inevitably.

1:09:10 Debra Schwartz: Do you find it as easy to change your life utterly and begin anew when you're older, as when you were younger?

1:09:18 Mort Sahl: No, because one thing, I got glaucoma and I have a muscular problem with my spine. No, it's not easy.

1:09:35 Debra Schwartz: So, you're how old now?

1:09:36 Mort Sahl: When I came up here?

1:09:38 Debra Schwartz: No, right now.

1:09:39 Mort Sahl: Now I'm 91.

1:09:40 Debra Schwartz: So, you're in your early 80s —

1:09:43 Mort Sahl: Yeah, maybe.

1:09:44 Debra Schwartz: With a blazer, and a pair of pants, jumping into a new life with no real — did you have friends here?

1:09:53 Mort Sahl: No, I'm in the Mill Valley Inn.

1:09:54 Debra Schwartz: You're at the Mill Valley Inn, where Lucy's placed you. So she found you basically. She went to you to book you for your work. Knowing Lucy as I do, she has her antenna out far and wide, and she's quite involved in — I guess I would say she sort of does a Vulcan mind meld: she sees the world in a slightly different way. She has a sense of things and she's quite intuitive. And so she senses Mort Sahl, and the importance of what you display and what you share, and brings you to Mill Valley. She might have even had a reason for that. So you come, you do well, quite well, immediately, and then you just jump into this new life with what's on your back basically.

1:10:49 Mort Sahl: Yeah, I jump in here and I've lost my driver's license meanwhile with Kenslea.

1:10:58 Debra Schwartz: Because you can't see?

1:11:00 Mort Sahl: Yeah, and I lost my nurse, so it means I've got no mobility out of here, but I still have slim beliefs. See, the act is still about Kennedy and the CIA in the theater. And I still like to get in my car and roll up and get a taco in the middle of the afternoon, but I can't. I'm up here and there's a certain kind of liberal shell here where all they talk about, if you go to a coffee house, is Trump. They blame all their failings on Trump.

1:11:38 Debra Schwartz: Well, you were here before Trump became president, 10 years ago.

1:11:45 Mort Sahl: Yeah, but they're materialistic.

1:11:53 Debra Schwartz: So did that offend you, moving to Mill Valley, and finding this world of —

1:11:57 Mort Sahl: No, I like Lucy and I like Greg.

1:12:02 Debra Schwartz: Greg?

1:12:03 Mort Sahl: Who was here.

1:12:04 Debra Schwartz: Your friend Greg, who was here.

1:12:08 Mort Sahl: I like them, but I don't like the city anymore.

1:12:11 Debra Schwartz: You don't? Did you ever like Mill Valley?

1:12:15 Mort Sahl: I was never here before. Mill Valley is where you came after you were a financial success in the city. Nobody was over here.

1:12:26 Debra Schwartz: Oh, there were —

1:12:28 Mort Sahl: Everybody I knew, when I lived in the city, drove an MG, and had two dogs on the back named Scotch and Soda.

1:12:39 Debra Schwartz: Named what?

1:12:40 Mort Sahl: Scotch and Soda.

1:12:44 Debra Schwartz: Scotch and Soda! [laughs]

1:12:46 Mort Sahl: All that stuff. I never came this way. I came from the East Bay to the city, but the city was a city then.

1:12:54 Debra Schwartz: Yes. What's the city now?

1:12:55 Mort Sahl: Today, who goes to Union Square? I used to go down there and shop and everything and it's changed now. There are drug dealers on every corner and you can't arrest them because of Kamala Harris and the police chief. And the liberals are still pretending it's the old world. Last night, a girl that works at the theater said, "My daughter just came out of Berkeley Law School, and what does she want? She wants to end capital punishment." Well, I watched Jerry Brown and Dianne Feinstein, and I didn't see any progress. That crowd is what's wrong with America. Now they haven't had enough, they gotta have Gavin Newsom, another man of accomplishment. The liberals have destroyed the country, and they're not liberals anyway. In Germany, they were called Social Democrats. They're usually Jews who didn't have the guts to be

communists when they were in Berkeley, and they make up for it by talking about Martin Luther King all the time, and they shouldn't. They should talk about J. Edgar Hoover.

1:14:10 Debra Schwartz: [laughs] I'm sorry if I'm laughing, it's just you have a way of saying —

1:14:11 Mort Sahl: I'm glad you're laughing. That delights me. The whole thing over there in Berkeley where the Jewish girls were always curious sexually about the black guys and the black guys you notice use that to their advantage. In that sense they're like every male: they take feminine curiosity and use it to their advantage. And it leads to the girl's disappointment, all the time. They won't admit any of this, they're all noble. They won't salute the flag after they play basketball, or before. And they're not noble. I mean if you go over to the Town Center you won't see a black guy behind the baby carriage.

1:15:00 Mort Sahl: Listen to this, when my wife leaves, China, she leaves the kid with me.

1:15:06 Debra Schwartz: Your son?

1:15:06 Mort Sahl: Yeah, which is the worst thing you could do. He's 14 years old, he's watching his mother walk out the door, and I'm cooking. A black lady I know volunteers to come over and help me. I want to take care of Mort Jr. in the house. The black lady turns out to be married to a highway patrolman and he's got a girl on the side. And he has a baby with the girl on the side. Then he has two, then he has three. So Lou, is the name of the lady, goes over and sees the girlfriend drinks, and the girls are starting to drink. So she takes all three over with her and starts raising them as her daughters, which'll give you an idea of her character. And what did every one of them do? Go out with a black athlete and have a kid with a guy that won't marry them. So history repeats itself, and then Lou saved up her money and opened up a soul food place with yams and ribs and everything. And she said to me, "Everybody is eligible to work here except black guys, 'cause you gotta watch them like a cop." Interesting.

1:16:38 Debra Schwartz: Including her husband, who is a black guy.

1:16:42 Mort Sahl: The highway patrolman. And you know, I've never used that on the stage and never told anybody that before, but if you did everybody would call you a bigot up here. But the question is, what category is the truth under? What is it about?

1:17:02 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so you're here in Mill Valley. We don't have the MGs with two dogs named Scotch and Soda in the back.

1:17:11 Mort Sahl: Not anymore.

1:17:12 Debra Schwartz: Not anymore, but we are in Mill Valley. This is where you live, you have this lovely apartment. Lucy's been, if nothing else, the best friend and a true fan to you. I mean you talk about love and it's more than words, it's actions. I mean

there is a woman in your world that is definitely, in her actions, in all ways is demonstrating love. And this is where you live. Tell me about Mill Valley. Be the lifeguard in our town.

1:17:50 Mort Sahl: Well, it's fraudulent. It's broken in two parts: there's the downtown crowd and then there's Tam Junction. And nobody can go anywhere or give you a massage, they have talk about tension and palm leaves yoga. Nobody will tell you where they bleed from the heart, not willingly. The idea of the theatre is —

1:18:35 Debra Schwartz: The Throckmorton Theatre.

1:18:36 Mort Sahl: Yeah. Lucy is refusing to compromise. I know those guys on the city council would like to make condos out of it. You know that tiger she's got on the side of the building?

1:18:52 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

1:18:52 Mort Sahl: She went to a city council meeting and a guy said, "We want that tiger off." And she said, "This is the home of Maria Muldaur and Dan Hicks."

1:19:11 Debra Schwartz: And Robin Williams.

1:19:12 Mort Sahl: And Bonnie Raitt. She said this is an artist's home. And the guy said, "Well, if you won't cooperate, as a city councilman, I'm stating that that must come off." And she said, "That status can always change." [laughs] And that's a lot for her. Because even when she knew this book was going south, all she did was stop ordering it so people —

1:19:42 Debra Schwartz: The book *The Last Man Standing* didn't do so well?

1:19:44 Mort Sahl: Wouldn't come in and get it autographed by me after the show. She didn't make a lot of noise about it, but that's all she did. She doesn't think it caught what it was about because it collided with the author's view of America. The author's one of those guys that thinks Barack Obama was noble.

1:20:08 Debra Schwartz: James Curtis.

1:20:10 Mort Sahl: You know, a black man at a distance who can be a noble. But they never would have made friends with Duke Ellington either. He was the best and he wasn't interested in being held up as the best.

1:20:32 Debra Schwartz: Back to Lucy.

1:20:33 Mort Sahl: Lucy's an individual but she's a fighter. She would never let anybody change her, not through psychoanalysis, not through marriage. Those girls are lucky to have her, you know.

1:20:50 Debra Schwartz: You mean her daughters?

1:20:52 Mort Sahl: Yeah.

1:20:53 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:20:53 Mort Sahl: You know Gabby?

1:20:55 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:20:56 Mort Sahl: She would never have anybody else understand her the way her mother does, that she'll go to New Zealand because she gets a rise out of that guy or anywhere else she has to go to feel like a woman. They talk about women, they don't know anything about women, they're afraid of women.

1:21:18 Debra Schwartz: Who's afraid of women?

1:21:20 Mort Sahl: The liberals are all afraid of women. And I knew the queens of the movement. I knew Betty Friedan, I knew Steinem real well, and they're not worthy representatives of women.

1:21:37 Debra Schwartz: Who is?

1:21:41 Mort Sahl: A woman who has the courage to go her own way whether it's love or microbiology at Stanford. You know, I know a girl here who was working at the pilates store and she got a biology degree from Stanford and her parents are materialistic Jewish people, which is always a mistake. And she loved Billie Holiday, so you know where she is now? In Nashville. She went there and took it the way it was and loves it.

1:22:23 Debra Schwartz: You are a dreamer?

1:22:29 Mort Sahl: And there are the other people here. You know Chris Britt, who hangs around the theater?

1:22:36 Debra Schwartz: I don't think so.

1:22:37 Mort Sahl: He works for Dell with Snapchat and all that stuff. So he has free time to go to Hawaii and meet Ram Dass [chuckles] and go up and talk to Lucy and come over here and talk to me and talk to Greg. It's a unique place in that way. But the percentage of people that are like that, there aren't enough.

1:23:08 Debra Schwartz: Where have you ever lived where there are enough? I mean, don't you find that it's kind of like mining for gold, if you have a vision or you're looking —

1:23:18 Mort Sahl: Great question.

1:23:19 Debra Schwartz: I mean, your music, let's say. You're part of a jazz band and you're always looking for that complementary sound that's unique in its own right, yet somehow there's synergy with you. It's not always so easy to find, is it?

1:23:34 Mort Sahl: No, the movies ruined my thinking.

1:23:37 Debra Schwartz: You've been brainwashed.

1:23:38 Mort Sahl: Yeah, by a bunch of Russian-Jewish guys that made those movies [chuckles] and were later blacklisted. For instance, you know Harry Cohn, you remember him?

1:23:50 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

1:23:51 Mort Sahl: Columbia.

1:23:52 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I love those old films.

1:23:52 Mort Sahl: A real fascist, you know? David Begelman walks in with Redford and he says to Harry, "Look at that punim. Have you ever seen a face like that?" And Harry Cohn went to the window. He said, "I can throw a rock out of this window and hit 15 guys that look like that." [chuckles] He wouldn't accept that. I mean, why were they that good? Why did Zanuck know that Gregory Peck wasn't just anybody? Why could Jimmy Stewart, who by the way was a fascist, how could he make those moves?

1:24:32 Debra Schwartz: It's the passion, you think?

1:24:34 Mort Sahl: Wayne, you certainly know Wayne's politics, but he's a humanist in his movies.

1:24:39 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, I think that's the word, humanist, that's often used with so many people.

1:24:45 Mort Sahl: Drama, it crosses over and that's why we run to it because you can't wrap your arms around your virtue at night. I sure know that personally. You know, to drive women away from romance, Steinem, 24-career opportunist to work for the CIA all her life. When she got married, the guy was a Republican and an arms dealer, whom she deserted when he had cancer. And I kept running into her because my best friend was Herb Sargent, the writer, and she had a big affair with him. Well, as big as she can have. I don't think she could love the way my mother did. You know, in spite of coming from money and going to none and realizing that people don't get bad, they just get old. She knew it.

1:26:00 Debra Schwartz: Your mother sounds very interesting.

1:26:01 Mort Sahl: Oh, she was something else. I owe her all the optimism. She always knew it would get better. And when I finally broke through in Hollywood, I brought them down and I got them a house in Westwood near UCLA. But when I took her out to the studio and she met Paul Newman and Sinatra and Glenn Ford, she was really in her element. She loved it.

1:26:36 Debra Schwartz: So you're here in Mill Valley, and this is your home now. It's likely to be your home, I think, for the rest of your life, wouldn't you say?

1:26:44 Mort Sahl: Pardon me?

1:26:45 Debra Schwartz: It's likely to be your home for the rest of your life, would you say? Do you think you have it in you to start again anywhere else?

1:26:55 Mort Sahl: I wouldn't know where to go, 'cause the last time I went to New York — Lucy and I went back. I did the Carlyle where Woody plays and we both had lunch with Woody and Cavett. And although I love them, Woody especially has been generous to me, they're kind of dead. I mean Woody married that chick.

1:27:23 Debra Schwartz: His stepdaughter.

1:27:30 Mort Sahl: And Cavett never had any fight in him. We get along, yeah, because he's my friend. That's what he wanted, and that's enough for me. The great Lenny Bruce, if he met a comedian and he got him a job and the guy got \$200, he'd take \$20 commission. The thing about Lenny Bruce is, he wasn't profound as a Jew. He couldn't see through walls, the way Jewish people used to. That's all a lie. You know, I was the technical advisor on the movie with Dustin.

1:28:12 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:28:14 Mort Sahl: And he made him into like Jesus. He wasn't. He was a guy, that was the lovable part of him. And then Dustin topped it off by coming to the Mill Valley Film Festival and going down to Fontaca, remember? Was that the name of it? Fontaca?

1:28:34 Debra Schwartz: Frantoio, the restaurant.

1:28:35 Mort Sahl: Frantoio. He comes in after the show, and walked right by me. I wrote a lot of *Tootsie* for Sydney Pollack and he walks right by me. I finally went over and talked to him and he treated me like a stranger. And he's not a star, that's why he was never a star, just because of that. Steve McQueen was a star.

1:29:06 Debra Schwartz: So Mort, let me ask you a couple of things about Mill Valley, a little bit more, because I appreciate your vision and your critique of what this town is like for you. You've lived in a lot of places, correct?

1:29:18 Mort Sahl: Yeah, oh yeah.

1:29:20 Debra Schwartz: You've lived in a lot of places, and this is where you live now in Mill Valley, which has its own particular — you know, we have proximity to the mountain, Mt. Tamalpais, we have proximity to San Francisco, all the basics that make the possibility for many things to happen here, both through nature, through culture, and it's liberal — or as you would say, I guess, pseudo-liberal. How would you yourself as a visionary see things differently to make this — you know, you with your x-ray vision. It's one thing to make a comment about the status quo, but you are a lifeguard and so if you are going to save this town, tell me what it needs.

1:30:14 Mort Sahl: Well, everybody who's ear I've got, I tell the truth. I think enough of them that I do it on the show and I do it on a personal basis when I'm down at Coyote.

1:30:30 Debra Schwartz: Coyote?

1:30:30 Mort Sahl: Greg's place. A girl, a masseur down there says to me, "How are you? I'd be a lot better without Trump." So, I do feel an obligation personally to tell her as a woman, her life can't be ruined by Trump. That's the coinage, that's the coin of the realm here, in most liberal communities, I'm sure it is in LA too. If you pick up Twitter all you read are men complaining about Trump, and very feminine men interestingly enough.

1:31:08 Debra Schwartz: So, let's say people are lost, Mort. People are lost. People are lost and they're doing their best, but they're lost. It's a confusing world, there's all kinds of strange things happening, incongruencies. Our souls are starved in some ways, the culture, consumerism, these things have altered our perceptions and our ability to see truth. What's the lifeline? This is your town, you know. You speak truth. You have your tools to resuscitate, as a lifeguard. What's in your toolbox?

1:31:52 Mort Sahl: You tell them the truth and see if anything you've got appeals to them. Like a salesman with a case full of your stuff, the Fuller Brush man. By the way, do you remember Senator Sam Ervin?

1:32:10 Debra Schwartz: No.

1:32:12 Mort Sahl: Well, it's before they had only mediocre people in congress. Sam Ervin said during Watergate to John Mitchell, "You were the attorney general, and you lied under oath, what do you have to say to that?" And Mitchell said, "I wouldn't do it again." And Ervin said, "I'm from North Carolina, and there was a traveling salesman who came down there one day, and he met a farmer's daughter, and she discovered she was in the family way. And there was a knock on his door at the hotel, he was looking down the barrel of a shotgun from the father. And the salesman said, "I'm sorry but I wouldn't do the same thing again." And the farmer said "You mean you're coming back to town?"

1:33:19 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

1:33:20 Mort Sahl: They have fiber in them. And I suppose what I admire about the Jews, is I'm looking for the fiber. So I am prejudiced in that sense. That they're not putting up a fight. They did in Russia. That's what killed Hitler. The general that defended Stalingrad and turned the war around was a Jew. And look at them in congress, look how soft they are. I realize it's romantic, and it's a far cry from realism, but you're always looking, if you're a man you should be looking. You're not looking for failure to reinforce you, you're hoping that there's somebody who will appreciate the line. The guy that puts out *Marin* magazine, he interviewed me, he said, "All the money you've made, you must be a very happy camper." [chuckles]

1:34:34 Mort Sahl: What a genius. With all the money I made? I was a flying for nothing on Air Force One, and having arguments with Kennedy, which he thought were foolhardy. But I was there when he argued with his wife who was really something. Last time I ran into her —

1:35:10 Debra Schwartz: Jacqueline Onassis?

1:35:10 Mort Sahl: Pardon me.

1:35:11 Debra Schwartz: You're talking about Jacqueline Onassis?

1:35:13 Mort Sahl: Jacqueline, yeah. I went into an art gallery on 73rd and Madison.

1:35:18 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:35:18 Mort Sahl: That's after I'd been on air with Garrison, and I walked up to her and she said, "I know, I know." You bet she knows.

1:35:30 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:35:31 Mort Sahl: The first party they had after he got sworn in, she wanted Sonny and Cher there and he wanted Pablo Casals. He won, and when he introduced Casals he said, "There hasn't been this much culture in the East Room since Jefferson dined alone." Think about it. I always thought of him, he was only 10 years older than me, and I always thought of him as like a stand in for Stevenson, who was a heartbreak guy, had a terrible marriage. And his wife hated him, 20 years later, with all that hatred that only a disappointed woman can summon. It must have been awful. Good kids, by the way.

1:36:38 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so, what scares you Mort right now at this point in your life, anything?

1:36:43 Mort Sahl: What's what?

1:36:44 Debra Schwartz: What scares you, what frightens you?

1:36:46 Mort Sahl: Oh, that I'm going to be alone the rest of my life.

1:36:48 Debra Schwartz: That you're going to be alone the rest of your life.

1:36:50 Mort Sahl: Yeah, that scares me.

1:36:51 Debra Schwartz: When you're talking about the fiber, you know, when that man said to you, "You're a happy camper," meaning you've had financial success and I'm watching your eyes roll as you say this because that's not what it is for you. But when you're talking about the fiber for you — I've listened to you speak now for probably close to two hours and I hear your passion. You have a horizon, it seems to me, that you see, maybe you alone can see, that guides you.

1:37:32 Mort Sahl: Well, if somebody like Kaiser, who's already talked to us, sponsors the show and publicizes it, and millions hear it, that would reinforce me a lot.

1:37:48 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so we haven't spoken about this in the interview, but in the pre-interview, we talked a little, and you said that you're now live streaming your show. What's going on? As we're getting closer to the end of the interview, let's discuss what it is in your work that's happening, that's poignant right now at the Throckmorton on Thursdays, correct?

1:38:16 Mort Sahl: Yeah, when I can put something out there and they really grasp it.

1:38:24 Debra Schwartz: They being?

1:38:25 Mort Sahl: The audience.

1:38:26 Debra Schwartz: The audience.

1:38:29 Mort Sahl: Really grasp it. Or, when you dumbfound them, like somebody called last night and they say, "What was going on with Marilyn Monroe and Jack Kennedy?" I said, "Why do you assume it was Jack Kennedy?" And there —

1:38:48 Debra Schwartz: Dot dot dot.

1:38:49 Mort Sahl: Those are great moments. When I can really grab their attention with something that's truthful, and remind them. I said, "You remember when Trump was elected, and you were all sitting Shiva, down here at the depot? What's happened to you since then? You're not in prison camps. What's the apprehension, what's it really about?" Of course, there's certain things that don't change. There's the mystery of women. I don't really understand Lucy. I'm eternally fascinated by her, but I don't understand her. I don't know why she isn't like all the others. [chuckles] She's not predictable. We turn to all the other stuff, writing and everything, and framing the jokes, in an effort to startle the audience. All the guys that I admired in the movies, could startle

the audience. I saw *Casablanca* two nights ago, and I knew the guys that wrote that. And I wonder how they knew that would grab an audience. It's all so unlikely. And once in a while I cry at movies in the act. Did you ever see a movie called *The Professionals*?

1:40:39 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:40:40 Mort Sahl: It's a Burt Lancaster and Lee Marvin. And at the end they startle the kidnapper. He sent them to retrieve his wife and she's in love with her captor. And they frustrate him and pursue him and he says, "You bastard!" And Lee Marvin says "Yes, sir. In my case an accidental birth. But you, sir, you're a self-made man." Those crystallized moments, you know.

1:41:24: And not just guys by the way, it comes along with certain people. Jane Mayer at the *New Yorker*. Susie Weitzman at Pacifica. She perceives because she's not afraid to join the human race. That's the stuff that makes you optimistic. The rest of course is social hypocrisy, which is good for me on the stage. I can always hold it up to the hard light of day. And notice, I started in '54. There's nobody doing it. They're running the other way. They keep talking about robotic cars.

1:42:15 Debra Schwartz: Do you describe yourself as a humanist?

1:42:20 Mort Sahl: I never have. I never thought about that.

1:42:23 Debra Schwartz: Is it occurring to you that you might be, even with all the inherent contradictions, that you are basically a humanist?

1:42:33 Mort Sahl: Well, it would be funny. I mean, you're really inquisitive. The last time I sat down with somebody, it was a guy, and he wasn't inquisitive. He was busy defending the status quo. And that's not lost on me.

1:42:57 Debra Schwartz: Maybe we're both searchers.

1:42:58 Mort Sahl: Talking about equality and everything, I don't think Tina Fey is a good writer, and it isn't because I'm anti-feminine. She doesn't grasp the absurdity of, as Al Sargent said, "love and pain and the whole damn thing." I don't know that I do, but I want to at least. I want to know what went wrong with those girls and me, and why they don't forgive. If China had the capacity to forgive that kid would still be alive.

1:43:46 Debra Schwartz: It's time for us to sort of close up but would you mind if I make a couple of observations?

1:43:53 Mort Sahl: Sure.

1:43:54 Debra Schwartz: First of all, I want to tell you how very interesting it's been for me to talk with you. I appreciate your insights and your candor. And I can't help but

see that you are a bit of a searcher, maybe even you're going to find death by astonishment at the end of your journey. Isn't that truly something that we can hope for?

1:44:31 Mort Sahl: I'm not prepared for the surprises. On my birthday I got taken out to the Two Birds.

1:44:42 Debra Schwartz: To the where?

1:44:43 Mort Sahl: The Two Birds, you know the Two Birds in Woodacre?

1:44:46 Debra Schwartz: You told me about that on the phone. It's the cafe Two Birds.

1:44:49 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And the girl was with me. She's 23. She's studying nursing at College of Marin and works at Balboa three nights a week. She surprises me with her perception. Not when you meet her mother, very good mother — even ground. The others get hard because the men disappoint them, I think. I don't know how hard any of my alumni are because none of them see me. You know, I called her in Antioch.

1:45:43 Debra Schwartz: Called who?

1:45:44 Mort Sahl: Sue. When I got up there. I said, I'm back.

1:45:48 Debra Schwartz: Your first wife.

1:45:49 Mort Sahl: Yes. How would you like to have lunch? "I don't think that would be a good idea at all." So she's over there with a guy she's been with 40 years, who's never married her. And has my name. But she was brutal on the phone, like she'd been saving it up. China won't even answer me. The birthdays, anything that meant anything to her. And Kenslea is with a guy who's been paying the bills for 10 years and is still married. Why would a woman let a guy get away with that? They're really awful, if they're not police guys, by conscience or income, they really are awful. [chuckles] Aren't they? And they won a medal for working in San Jose.

1:47:03 Debra Schwartz: Mort, I think —

1:47:06 Mort Sahl: What is the matter with guys? [laughs] I never have asked anybody this before. I'm usually probably afraid of the answer.

1:47:16 Debra Schwartz: I'm going to give you an answer. I'm going to step outside of the bounds of interview and I'm going to give you an answer. When I was studying science, as an adult, I asked my professor, I told him how frustrated I was. I felt like I was on my knees, looking through a keyhole, into a vast room filled with everything I wanted to know, but I could only see as much as that keyhole. And I was so frustrated. And he said, "In order to be comfortable studying science, you must learn to love the mystery."

1:47:53 Mort Sahl: What's that last part?

1:47:54 Debra Schwartz: You must learn to love the mystery.

1:47:57 Mort Sahl: Oh. [chuckles] Well —

1:48:00 Debra Schwartz: I can only say that in trying to understand so much, as I see you ponder and search like a cellphone roaming for that connection, that the mystery abounds, and satisfaction and understanding isn't a given, but we might learn to love the mystery. I don't know. I have no answer for your question. But that you're still wondering about that, that your heart is even broken while you're describing these things, and you're perplexed, and you search for meaning around you, is the best description I can think of to describe the individual I'm meeting today.

1:48:53 Mort Sahl: Well, then you'll be interested in this. I never told anybody this, but our conversation's been so good. I wrote a movie for Robin before he got sick.

1:49:06 Debra Schwartz: Robin Williams?

1:49:08 Mort Sahl: Yeah. And it was about a guy who was invested in what I'm invested in. He finally sues the studios for giving him unreal expectations of romance, and he wins. [laughs] They take the case, because they want to publicized their movies. And he's losing. But everybody's watching, 'cause it's about love, everybody's watching the trial. A guy like Jerry Weintraub gets up representing the Motion Picture Association and he says, "Who is this guy to put down three dollars and expect all his problems to be solved? It's only a movie! He's wrong! He's crazy and delusional." And his wife stands up in the back of the courtroom and says, "You used to be like that. That's why I loved you." And he wins. [laughs] I wrote that for Robin. I paid off Kenslea's alimony with that. And of course, we couldn't get it made, 'cause they thought he can only play a maniac.

1:50:36 Debra Schwartz: Oh, he was a very dear man. I'm sorry that that's the case.

1:50:40 Mort Sahl: Hell of a guy, I found out up close. Oh man.

1:50:47 Debra Schwartz: Mort, I'd like to read that screenplay someday.

1:50:52 Mort Sahl: Pardon?

1:50:53 Debra Schwartz: I'd like to read that screenplay someday.

1:50:55 Mort Sahl: Oh yeah, easy, if I can find it around here. Chris typed it up. I just walked up and down and dictated it. He tried to get it made, he couldn't get it made.

1:51:09 Debra Schwartz: Of course.

1:51:10 Mort Sahl: One last blow for romance.

1:51:17 Debra Schwartz: But one rah-rah for hope. And you're hanging onto it till the end, I think, the belief.

1:51:27 Mort Sahl: Well, it's the same with the act. The act is not all stuff that people can easily process. I even do part of the Garrison trial in the act, and that's a hard thing to focus on, but we did it. We went to court. I wrote the summation to the jury. But I thought, they ought to walk away with what happened to America, whether they want to participate in it. That's what I want the show to accomplish. Because they have the mistaken notion that only Trump participates in it.

1:52:16 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:52:17 Mort Sahl: God knows, I don't know him. I used to know them pretty well. But he's had one secretary for 38 years. There must be some human part of him.

1:52:32 Debra Schwartz: I don't know. I think that I'm going to have to come see your show though.

1:52:40 Mort Sahl: You're more than welcome. You're pretty smart, Debra.
[chuckles]

1:52:46 Debra Schwartz: Well, it all depends on the interviewee. Mort, I'm going to close this interview finally. I hate to do so because you're an interesting man and I appreciate your passion. I appreciate your courage as well. You've stood up on stage and you've challenged yourself and others. You've made a life of that, and for that I thank you. You're an example for many of us to keep up the good fight, in that regard, 'cause it's not always easy to stay with truth: it hurts. It takes a lot of courage to see the world as it is, not as you want it to be. So, I admire your efforts and your horizon. [chuckles] I thank you for living in our town, however the fates brought you here. And I hope to have another opportunity to sit and talk and chat with you some days as friends.

1:53:42 Mort Sahl: Oh sure.

1:53:43 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

1:53:44 Mort Sahl: Absolutely.

1:53:49 Debra Schwartz: Is there any one thing you can say or a moment that you can share upon closing, a moment in your life that you can end this interview with, an experience, something that we can close with?

1:54:10 Mort Sahl: Well, it's kinda provincial I should tell you at the beginning, but you know when a guy like Franklin stands up and says, Assange and the Russians defeated Hillary?

1:54:40 Debra Schwartz: A guy like who?

1:54:41 Mort Sahl: Assange betrayed Hillary, or Adam Schiff. And I keep thinking to myself, how can a Jewish guy do that?

1:54:53 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

1:54:54 Mort Sahl: I was still that provincial. And for so little. Whereas I'm remembering Paul Wellstone.

1:55:11 Debra Schwartz: Paul who?

1:55:11 Mort Sahl: Wellstone, he was up there in Minnesota, and McCarthy was a very close friend of mine. He understood all the shorthand. Last night, someone said to me, what about the black football players not rising for the national anthem? And I was tempted to say to them, let's talk about something meaningful. And I said, just because you're paid to betray Jesus, and you don't cash the check, doesn't make you a Christian. Let them wrestle with that for a while. [chuckles]

1:56:06: I'm not very religious, but I believe that because it's incredible to me that the guy brought out everybody's cruelty, because he was looking for their virtue.

1:56:21 Debra Schwartz: Jesus, you mean?

1:56:22 Mort Sahl: And he can only rely on his mother, which is really amazing, but not amazing. But the undercurrent through this whole conversation that people are living with people they don't love and it's so hard even when you love them, how do they sustain all that? I'm not a good enough writer to write it. I wouldn't accept an assignment like that.

1:57:08: But all the old guys, even when I started, I needed to write because they wouldn't let me work as a performer, after the Garrison thing. I didn't know how to write. So I went to all the writers that I knew in Hollywood, and they were amazing. Jack Newman, who's a very good writer, he said to me, "You know there's kind of a gloom hanging over this year. You're depressed, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah, my friends love me now." He said, "Okay, think of yourself at a bar, and you're ready to drink till you fall down 'cause you're depressed." And I said, "Okay." He said, "Then at the end of the bar you notice that a beautiful girl has walked in. How do you feel now?" [laughs]

1:58:06: They were great that way. They knew just what to say, you know. A guy says to John Wayne, "You work around here?" He says, "No." "We worked every spread, you name 'em." And Wayne says, "No you name 'em." And he said, "Well I gotta confess to

you we were in prison, but you would give a man another chance wouldn't you, Mr. Anderson?" And Wayne says, "Yeah, but I can't abide a liar." They knew all of that. I don't know if they knew it. Did you ever see that movie *The Cowboys*?

1:58:55 Debra Schwartz: No.

1:58:56 Mort Sahl: He's broke you know. He's lower middle class, he's got to drive the herd out, and he's older, so he takes kids out of the junior high and lets them drive the herd, and the kids go into the water and one of them almost drowns. And Wayne says, "You might as well get used to it." And he pushes them into the water and the kid mumbles, "Son of a bitch." He said, "What did you say? And he says it again. He says it louder. So the kid yells, "You're a mean crusty old son of a bitch." And Wayne says, "Good. I wouldn't make a habit out of saying that though." [laughs] There's that much of him left, but I don't know why they knew that, why they knew how far they could push you.

1:59:55 Debra Schwartz: Sometimes, you know.

1:59:56 Mort Sahl: They made Humphrey Bogart a leading man and he wins Ingrid Bergman.

2:00:01 Debra Schwartz: You know Mort, sometimes you just have to appreciate the mystery. I think we can close with that. Don't you think?

2:00:16 Mort Sahl: The movies were all we could afford when I was a kid.

2:00:18 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

2:00:18 Mort Sahl: It was a dime.

2:00:20 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

2:00:23 Mort Sahl: When I really made money, I didn't find that much more understanding proportionally. And when I left Beverly Hills, Persians came to buy the house, a gay Persian couple. I suppose people appear too tolerant, but it may be a national condition.

2:00:49 Debra Schwartz: It may be a national condition right now, I don't know. In any case, we're going to have to close this interview, but I'll be back to talk life with you. I have the same curiosities; I'm as baffled as you. So let's continue this off the record, shall we? [laughs]

2:01:11 Mort Sahl: Okay.

2:01:12 Debra Schwartz: Mort, thank you so much for taking the time.

2:01:15 Mort Sahl: It was great to meet you.

2:01:17 Debra Schwartz: And for sharing your amazing life, I've got to say. I will see you at the Throckmorton.

2:01:24 Mort Sahl: Good. That would be great.

2:01:26 Debra Schwartz: And perhaps some of our listeners will see you there too. Keep it up, man! Keep it up pal! [laughs]

2:01:32 Mort Sahl: How was Steve when you interviewed him?

2:01:38 Debra Schwartz: We'll end our interview, shall we?

2:01:41 Mort Sahl: Oh yeah, okay.

2:01:42 Debra Schwartz: Lets end, okay? Thanks so much Mort.

2:01:44 Mort Sahl: You're welcome.

2:01:45 Debra Schwartz: This would conclude your interview.