Satirist Mort Sahl draws bow

By Hillary Hauser
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Comedy has gone down the television tubes.

Furthermore, says American satirist Mort Sahl, there are more comedians — but less humor — than ever before.

Sahl, who will brandish his brand of humor 8 p.m. Saturday at the Lobero Theater, said in a telephone interview that television has amalgamated comedy across the country — to the point that there is no difference between what is funny in Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York.

"In the '50s, there were regional differences," Sahl said. "Today, there is a homogenized New York-L.A. pattern. Everyone sees it on TV."

Furthermore, the trouble with the professional folks who tell jokes, Sahl said, is that they don't have any humor.

"I don't see any blistering insight," Sahl said. "There are more comedians than ever before and less humor. There are a lot of untalented people working. I think a humorist ideally should present a side of an issue you hadn't considered before you saw it."

Sahl obviously knows the serious side of joking around. Following his 1953 entry onto the comedic stage at San Francisco's famed hungry i, the man with the golden tongue quickly became known as "the Great Debunker" and "the Thinking Man's Comedian."

For Sahl, current events, politics and politicians are the soul of wit. He begins each day with a trip to a newsstand near his home in Beverly Hills, loads up on newspapers and news magazines, then digests the literature throughout the afternoon.

He writes at night — his own material, screenplays, and, in the past, his autobiography "Heartland." ("Writing is awful, I'm a performer," Sahl said. "The book is a closed chapter").

Today's comedians, Sahl said, are afraid to get into the real issues facing mankind.

"Graham Greene said a comedian is supposed to be a dangerous man," Sahl said. "Comedians today want to join the establishment, they don't want to overthrow it. They want to get on the 'Tonight Show.' They're cautious. They won't kid the women's movement, they're all riding around in a bus talking about toxic waste."

Sahl appreciates intelligence and wit, and he doesn't appreciate some of the methods of modern-day comedians.

For example, swearing.

"I don't know what these people are going to do for emphasis," Sahl said. "People don't know how to use the language. Enrico Banducci (owner of the hungry i) would never let anyone curse on stage."

He praised the talents of Bob Hope, Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton, among others.

"I think Hope is a senior statesman," Sahl said. "He's always ready to go, he's really cooking — right there. A lot of younger guys could learn something from any of these champions. Talented people aren't insecure."

Sahl said comedy is a way to "bear the tragedy of living."

"It's all funny when you look back on it, but it sure isn't funny when it's happening," Sahl said. "A sense of humor is a sign of maturity. I don't think everyone has a sense of humor. Humor is another way of looking at the world."

Political humorist Mort Sahl takes aim Saturday at Lobero.

Like humor, true wit is a rare commodity, Sahl said.

"Wit is something else again," he said. "When you talk about wit, you wouldn't be talking about professional comedians. You're talking about someone else. Composers, with a classical background — there, you're talking wit. After that, the pickings are lean. There is very little you can quote from Eddie Murphy and Joan Rivers."

Comedians are not the only targets of Sahl's bow and arrow. Politicians are forever and especially ripe for his shootings.

His current gripe is what he perceives to be the non-use of the English language by the country's leaders.

"The last time you heard anyone use the language was when (Eugene) McCarthy was in the

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Senate," Sahl said. "But now you should hear them. It's interesting when people are educated. The press conference with Gen. (Alexander) Hague was remarkable. He can always express himself. He uses the English language."

As disheveled as the use of language is the state of the nation, Sahl said.

"The country needs some optimism," he said. "It needs more Don McLean ("American Pie") and less Bruce Springsteen. There was a time when athletes were to be admired and weren't keeping Dexadrine in their lockers. We need to defeminize men and feminize the women. The label on the can is not what's in the can. Things are not what they seem."

The present generation is too intent on material things, Sahl said.

"It's a very mercenary generation," he said. "Your soul can be neglected, but if you have a BMW in the garage, you're O.K. Women — you can be an executive, welcome to the land of heart attack."

Sahl said he feels a lot of people don't have control over their destiny — because they don't become involved in the issues that affect them.

"They start in the morning with the 'Today Show' and end with Ted Koppel," Sahl said. "And they've felt they've dealt with the issues because they've listened."

Sahl said the two political parties in the United States have become indistinguishable — "two branches of the same army."

"While the liberals kept talking about women's lib and saving the redwoods, the conservatives went on to take over the country," he said. "There were once two parties in the country, but not any more."

The Democrats, Sahl said, "have gone from Eugene McCarthy to Mondale — which shows they haven't learned anything."

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—American satirst, Mort Sahl

The left wing of the country, Sahl said, has all but flown away.

"The liberals have gone off on self-righteous causes and are exercising long-distance morality," he said. "Like Africa. Pushing morality on others is always easy. We don't know what to do about America."

Over the years, Sahl has been deeply involved in the political scene in more ways than jokes. He wrote speeches for John F. Kennedy, then spoke out in favor of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's theory about the conspiracy surrounding Kennedy's assassination.

"I was always aware," Sahl said. "There was a time when people had politics. Now they're complaining they're not getting a share of the pie — that's not being political."

He recently performed at a White House correspondent's dinner, and participated in a Gerald Ford symposium on political humor.

Sahl said Reagan is "astute" in the area of humor, but that Jimmy Carter "didn't have a lot" of it.

Professional jokes about any recent U.S. president, he said, are, in his opinion, weak.

"Nobody said anything about Gerald Ford other than that he fell down the stairs," Sahl said. "Jimmy Carter's teeth and Ronald Reagan's hair are pretty thin stuff."

At the heart of real comedy, he said, are the "things that bother you."

"You find out what it's really about," Sahl said. "You don't take sides. You look at the whole board and see what the game is about."

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