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# Newsweek



**Steve  
Martin  
Is One  
Wild and  
Crazy  
Guy**

**Comedy's  
New  
Face**



# Comedy's New Face



Photo by Harold Kruger

A throwback to vaudeville, Red Skelton and Jerry Lewis

**H**e is wearing a custom-tailored, white-lined, three-piece suit, and his prematurely gray hair is parted neatly at the side. The look is straight and serious. He could be just another slick junior executive.

*Hi, folks, my name is Steve Martin... and it's great to be here tonight. I know that sounds phony, because every entertainer in the world comes out and goes [throws open arms]... "HEY, IT'S REALLLLLLL GREAT TO BE HERE." But I am sincere when I say... "HEY, IT'S REALLLLLLL GREAT TO BE HERE." So listen, how much was it to get in?... Five bucks?... [chuckles smugly]. OK [turning serious], you paid the money, you're expecting to see a professional show... so let's not waste any more time, let's go with... PROFESSIONAL SHOW BUSINESS, let's go, hey... [smashes nose into microphone].*

He is anxious to share his troubles:  
*How many people have cats? Now let me ask you this... do ya trust 'em? Because I've gotta get a pair of cat handcuffs... and I gotta get 'em fast. What a drag... I found out my cat was embezzling from me. You think you know a cat for ten years, he pulls something like this. I found out that while I was away, he would go out to the mailbox, pick up the checks, take 'em down to the bank and cash 'em... disguised as me. I wouldn't have caught him, but I went out to his house, outside, where he sleeps... and there was about \$3,000 worth of cat toys out there. And you can't return 'em 'cause they have spit all over them...*

Suddenly, guilt consumes him:  
*I'm feelin' kinda depressed. I guess I'm thinking about my old girlfriend. Oh, we were together about three years. Guess I kinda miss her... She's not living any more... and I guess I blame myself for her death. We were at a party one night. We weren't getting along. She began to drink. She ran out to the car, I followed her out. I guess I didn't realize how much she'd been drinking. She asked me to drive her home, and I refused. We argued a little bit further, she asked me once again... would you PLEASE drive me home?... I didn't want to... So I shot her.*

But his self-doubt is momentary:  
*Yes, I'm a wild and craaaazy guy... the kind of guy who might like to do unnnnathing... at anytime... to drink champagne at 3 a.m., or maybe... at 4 a.m... eat a live chipmunk... or maybe even... [excitedly]... WEAR TWO SOCKS ON ONE FOOT.*

Few comedians have more sheer fun onstage than Steve Martin. No matter that he is a fastidiously well-groomed, earnest-looking, 32-year-old Wasp who was raised in conservative Orange County, Calif., by parents who prized propriety and disdained flamboyance, Martin nonetheless steps before a microphone, takes a polite sip of water, turns and spits it out on the floor. He puts on nose glasses and bunny ears, wears a fake arrow through his head and is seized by a sudden fit of "happy feet" that sends him careening across the stage like a road runner gone berserk.

**Steve Martin Is One Wild and Crazy Guy!**



'I've got happy feet'

All Steve Martin asks is that everyone have a good time. His approach is a throwback to vaudeville, slapstick and the comedy of his childhood idols, Red Skelton and Jerry Lewis, but it is flecked with a '70s penchant for self-parody. Along with Chevy Chase and Martin Mull (page 70), Martin is part of a counter-revolution in American comedy: white and middle-class in appearance, mock arrogant in posture and unthreatening in its message. His act, which he writes himself, speaks to an audience raised on television and sophisticated about show-business affectations. Martin shapes his parodies with the gentle affection

'Getting small'



one might expect from a comedian who got his start at Disneyland. He has a sharp eye for human foibles, but he turns his insights into comic bits so absurd that only a fool would take offense. The closest he comes to political satire is in his vision of the retired Richard Nixon—a lone figure walking along the beach in San Clemente, wearing baggy old shorts and carrying a metal detector. The only minority group he champions is "rubberheads." "Yes, I'm one, but so what?" he asks the audience indignantly. "You probably believe that old prejudice that all rubberheads throw fish... WELL, IT'S JUST NOT TRUE! GO AHEAD, CALL ME A RUBBERHEAD!" They do, and Martin promptly yanks a rubber fish from his inside jacket pocket and hurls it across the stage.

For a moment, he flirts with a serious issue: "I'm on drugs. You know what I'm talking about... I like to get small... It's very dangerous for kids, because they get real-lilly small... I know I

shouldn't get small when I'm driving, but I was driving" around the other day and a cop pulls me over... says, 'Hey, are you small?' I say, 'No, I'm tall.' He says, 'I'm gonna have to measure you.' They give you a little test with a balloon. If you can get inside it, they know you're small... and they can't put you in a regular cell either, 'cause you walk right out."

Even when Steve Martin makes jokes at his own expense, he lets you know that he knows it's all part of the act. He makes a contorted effort to play a chord on his banjo, then breaks into a riff that reveals how well he can really play. He picks up a handful of oranges, announces that it's time for juggling, drops them on the floor, then picks them up again and begins juggling as though it were the easiest thing in the world. He performs a magic trick with a candle—first making it vanish, then revealing its hiding place by leaving his arm ostentatiously outstretched. No sooner does the audience break up than he folds his arm at the elbow and proves that the trick worked after all. What makes you laugh so hard is the sight of this reasonable man so shamelessly shedding his inhibitions, this boy who should know better gleefully acting naughty—and getting away with it.

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'I'm a unique kind of guy'

Martin's act is broad enough to reach the vast middle-of-the-road audience that watches the "Tonight" show, where he is a frequent guest and occasional host. At the same time, it is hip enough to make him

one of the most popular guest-hosts on TV's most irreverent comedy show, "Saturday Night Live," where his best bits have been with Not Ready for Prime Time player Dan Aykroyd, as one of the oh-so-swinging Czechoslovakian playboys. In concert, he's greeted like a rock superstar: fans show up sporting bunny ears and nose glasses; his arrivals onstage are invariably greeted with standing ovations, and hardcore Martin addicts yell out requests for their favorite bits.

"Steve is exactly right for the current atmosphere," says fellow comedian David Steinberg. "We are burned out on relevance and anger. He offers a special form of es-



'Rubberheads throw fish'

shouldn't get small when I'm driving, but I was driving" around the other day and a cop pulls me over... says, 'Hey, are you small?' I say, 'No, I'm tall.' He says, 'I'm gonna have to measure you.' They give you a little test with a balloon. If you can get inside it, they know you're small... and they can't put you in a regular cell either, 'cause you walk right out."

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'We're having some fun now'



ENTERTAINMENT

cape and there is no hostility in his act." For the moment, Martin is the hottest stand-up comic in America. In December, he completed a two-month, mostly sold-out 50-city concert tour that grossed more than \$1 million. His first recording, "Let's Get Small," was released in September, quickly became the best-selling comedy album of the year and recently won a Grammy Award. Now, with two new albums recorded (one of them to be released in the fall), Martin has turned his attention to films.

**H**is first effort was a comedy short, "The Absent-Minded Waiter," which he wrote and which has been nominated for an Academy Award. In it, Martin plays, with hilarious aplomb, the most incompetent waiter who ever worked in a restaurant. He has finished filming a role in Robert Stigwood's "Sgt. Pepper" and has accepted an offer to star in George Lucas's next film, "Radioland Murders." Universal has agreed to finance and distribute the movie of Martin's full-length screenplay, "Easy Money," and has signed him to play the lead role: a gas-station attendant who suddenly strikes it rich and sets out to squander his fortune. For a newcomer, Martin's deal is spectacular: \$100,000 for the script, \$500,000 as the star and a 50-50 split of the project's profits. He has contracted with NBC to do two TV specials, the first to air this year. In the midst of all this, he manages to slip away every several weeks for a few live performances. Less than a year ago, the best shot that Steve Martin could get in Las Vegas was opening Helen Reddy's show. That didn't seem bad. Recently, he accepted the Riviera Hotel's offer to headline there for a week in June—at a fee of \$160,000.

The absurdity of such a windfall has not been lost on Martin. "I love money," he tells audiences. "I love everything about it. I bought some pretty good stuff. Got me a \$300 pair of socks... got a fur sink... let's see... an electric dog-polisher... a gasoline-powered turtle-neck sweater... and of course I bought some dumb stuff, too." At the same time, he doesn't like to be taken advantage of. "I'm so mad at my mother," he announces lividly. "She's 102 years old and she called me up last week... said she wanted to borrow ten dollars for some food. I told her, 'Hey... I work

for a living.' So I lent her the money—had my secretary bring it down—and yesterday she calls me up and says she can't pay me back for a while... I said, 'What is this bull—? ... So I worked it out with her... I'm gonna have her carry my bar bells up to the attic.'

What worries Steve Martin's real mother is not that her son might actually treat her that way (he is a lavish gift-giver, both to parents and friends), but that the public might assume he's really capable of such behavior. "I'm so afraid people will think he's a show-off," says Mary Lee Martin. "He's never been that way in his personal life. I've never even heard him use a four-letter word. He's just real quiet, like me."

It's a description the real Steve Martin probably wouldn't quarrel with: Offstage, he wouldn't dream of wearing bunny ears or even telling a few casual jokes, except in the company



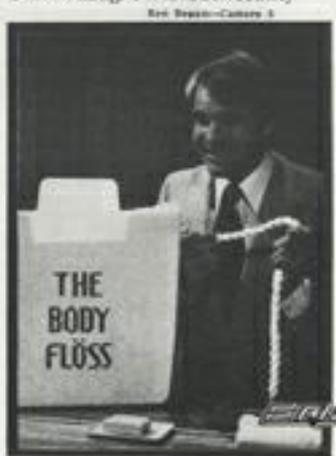
In 'Sgt. Pepper': For a newcomer, spectacular movie deals

of close friends. Indeed, if comedians can be roughly divided between those who are perpetually "on" and those who stop performing the moment the lights go down, then Steve Martin rates a special category. In private, he does not just turn off; he removes his motor. To those who don't know him well, he can come across as bland and remote, sometimes even as cold. Partly it's because he is genuinely shy and reserved, but perhaps it's also because he has learned that his manner helps keep people at a comfortable distance. "It's schizoid, but I find it embarrassing to be the center of attention in public," he explains. "It's like there's always been a ring around me. There are a couple of people who are inside it, and everything else is outside."

**M**artin's life reflects both his concern for privacy and his lack of offstage flamboyance. Never married, he has been dating actress Bernadette Peters for the past six months, but the only live-in companions in his solar-heated house in Aspen, Colo., are two undemanding cats—Betty and Dr. Forbes. Although his neighbors include such actors, writers and rock musicians as Jack Nicholson, Leon Uris and the Eagles, who have adopted Aspen as a second home, the closest he gets to socializing with other stars is an occasional game of horseshoes with next-door neighbor John Denver. He drives a jeep, relaxes by playing the banjo, listens mostly to Irish folk music and is a serious collector of late-nineteenth-century American art. That even these innocuous personal details might find their way into print worries him. "On the one hand, I don't want people looking in my window and knocking at my door," he says. "But the main thing is I don't want this information to distort my onstage character to the point that people don't believe it any more."

In fact, the stand-up comic in Steve Martin is just as much part of his personality as the standoffish recluse. It so happens that the two have never chosen to socialize with one another, a circumstance that dates from his childhood. Martin parts reluctantly with memories of his early life, but he acknowledges that his family was not an especially close one and that communication was limited. "My parents were outside the circle I created," he says. "They watched what I was doing and cared about it, but we didn't talk much. My father was someone to be feared. It's sort of tragic

On TV: Laughs without hostility



when your mother warns you, 'Wait until your father gets home.' You build up this dread and it puts a burden on him."

When he was 5, the Martins moved from Waco, Texas, to Inglewood, Calif. Steve's father acted occasionally in a local playhouse but made his living as a real-estate broker. From the beginning, Steve was stage-struck. "The first day I saw a movie, I knew that's what I wanted to do," he recalls. "By the age of 5, I was entertaining. I'd watch the skits on the Red Skelton show, memorize 'em and then go to school and perform during 'show and tell.'" When he was 10, Martin's family moved to Garden Grove, 2 miles away from Anaheim, where Disneyland had just opened. Steve lost no time walking over and securing his first job—selling 25-cent guidebooks. He worked weekdays after school, all day on weekends and full time in the summer, a schedule he maintained for the next eight years. Home became simply a place to sleep. "I remember my childhood as being very happy,"



At 9, with parents and sister, performing with Stormy, doing magic in the desert

he says, "because I had so much fun. Having fun was the most crucial, important thing there was."

Nothing was more fun than being in Disneyland: fireworks every night, pretty girls to follow around and show business at every turn. He learned to lasso with a trick rope and perform magic tricks, but the most fun of all was watching an old vaudevillian named Wally Boag. Here was a guy who told good clean jokes and could make animals out of balloons. Martin managed to catch Boag's act three or four times a day, until he had it memorized. He also took up the banjo and, at 18, got an acting job in a melodrama at nearby Knott's Berry Farm—four times a day, five on Sunday. After each show, he performed a ten-minute hodgepodge of music, magic and comedy. It formed the nucleus of the act he still performs today.

There was never much time for school. "I had enough innate intelligence to get B's and C's," he says, "but I was mostly a goof-off." He did run successfully for cheerleader, and in his current act Martin likes to say that his first writing experience was composing cheers for the team. "But the other cheerleaders," he tells audiences, "were so jealous they

wouldn't use my cheers. I wrote, 'Die, you gravy-sucking pigs.'" Martin finally managed to graduate from Garden Grove High School and even to enroll in junior college. It was then that he met a girl named Stormy. "It was very romantic and nonsexual," he says. "I was inclined to romance with a capital R, and she convinced me to read 'The Razor's Edge' by Somerset Maugham. It was all about a person who questions life. I read it and I can remember afterward sitting in a park and Stormy saying, 'Knowledge is the most important thing there is.' That's when I really decided to go to college. I



transferred to Long Beach State and majored in philosophy. I went at it totally, 100 per cent, all the way. I'd go in for a test, and it was like I'd done it before I got there. It was a very important time in my life."

He began with metaphysics, switched over to logical positivism, plunged next into Wittgenstein and the puzzle of semantics, and ended up concluding that philosophy was impossible. "At that point I quit and went back into the arts," he says. "It was the only thing that had real meaning because it had no meaning. In art, truth comes and goes according to fashion. It can't be measured. You don't have to explain why, or justify anything. If it works, it works. As a performer, non sequiturs make sense, nonsense is real."

Martin today gets great mileage from his artful abuse of logic. In one bit, he starts off with this compelling proposition: "You . . . can be a millionaire . . . and never pay taxes." Then

he reasons it out. "You say, 'Steve, how can I be a millionaire and never pay taxes?' First . . . get a million dollars. But you say . . . 'What do I tell the taxman when he comes to my door and says you have never paid taxes?' Two simple words. Two simple words in the English language . . . 'I forgot.' How many times do we let ourselves get into terrible situations because we don't say, 'I forgot'? Let's say you're on trial for armed robbery. You say to the judge, 'I forgot armed robbery was illegal.'" Now there's only one philosophical dilemma that preoccupies Martin. "Should you," he inquires of audiences, "yell 'MOVIE!' in a crowded firehouse?"

In 1967, he transferred to UCLA, switched his major to theater and began working local clubs at night—to mixed notices. "Sometimes I'd kill, but a lot of times there'd be no reaction at all," he remembers. "I developed the theory that anyone can be great sometimes; the hardest thing is to be consistent. That's what I decided to shoot for." His ambition was interrupted by a chance to write for the Smothers Brothers ("Young was in," he explains), and at 21 he dropped out of college for good. The show survived only that season, but when it was over the writers were awarded an Emmy. A string of writing jobs followed—for Pat Paulsen, Sonny and Cher, Glen Campbell—until Martin's salary had reached \$1,500 a week. It was good money, but the urge to perform persisted.

Against the advice of nearly everyone, Martin quit and returned to working in clubs. "I recall seeing Steve do his act then," says Carl Gottlieb, an old friend and a co-writer for the Smothers Brothers. "He made balloon animals and did the magic, and it just seemed weird to be trying that stuff. In those





Fans at autograph party, Martin letting go: A special form of escape

days, everyone wanted to be Lenny Bruce." About the same time, Martin began opening for rock acts. "He'd always been kind of conservative, driven nice cars, made a lot of money and kept his hair short," recalls his manager, William McEuen. "But then he started trying to conform. He grew a beard, let his hair grow and began wearing turquoise jewelry, a concho belt, the works." But rock audiences had not come for comedy. "The last thing they had was an attention span," says McEuen. "The high point of his act for them was probably juggling, his real Dadaesque stuff, like when he'd say, 'Now, I'm going to bananaland. Two things are true there: all chairs are green, and no chairs are green.'"

In his act today, Martin makes a passing reference to that period. "I'm not into drugs," he confides. "I used to be ... In the old days everybody'd get stoned. People would be watching me ... and they'd be going [takes a long, simulated drag] ... Hey ... those guys are pretty good." It's a funny bit, but beneath it there lurks a trace of anger. "It wasn't the drugs that bothered me," says Martin. "It was the way people acted on 'em. They behaved like blithering idiots, acid casualties." It was enough to make Martin want to reform himself, and even today his act has a subtle but persistent undercurrent of evangelism. "Straighten up," it seems to say. "I did, and look what it did for me."

The transformation began when he left Los Angeles in 1973. Fed up with the smog and the traffic, he simply took off with a girlfriend named Iris. They ended up in Santa Fe, stayed there for a year and then parted ways. Steve moved to Aspen and continued to alter his style—both professionally and personally. Already a vegetarian, he took up skiing in earnest and got into his best physical shape in years. He cut his hair, shed his outlandish outfits and took to wearing a white suit onstage. (He now claims not to have worn a pair of jeans since then, onstage or off.) Perhaps most important, he vowed never again to open for anyone. Better, he reasoned, to play small clubs and build your own audience.



In Aspen: Hiding from too much attention in public

Martin occasionally bombed during the next two years, but his act grew exponentially. He'd do an hour-long concert in a 250-seat club, then walk offstage and continue performing for another hour on the street. In Nashville, he led an audience of several hundred over to a local hamburger joint, ordered 274 hamburgers, then switched the request to one French fry to go. In Columbia, S.C., he took his audience to an empty swimming pool, persuaded them to climb in and then swam laps across their outstretched arms. In San Francisco, when a local reviewer wrote that Martin "did nothing in his act that would make you want to remember him," Steve ended his next performance by reciting from the review, all the while peeling an armful of bananas and matter-of-factly placing them on his shoulder, in his pockets and between his legs.

By the end of 1975, he was selling out such places as the prestigious Boarding House in San Francisco. There, in March 1976, he gave up one of his last vices. He'd developed a habit of drinking liberally before performances, sleeping into the next afternoon and waking up with a miserable hangover. "It got so I thought maybe I was the kind of person who is depressed all the time," he recalls. "Then I quit, and I know it sounds stupid but I really felt better instantly. It was fun to be in control again."

Six months later, Martin broke through nationally. In one two-week stretch during the fall of 1976, he got an opportunity to do two shows that exposed him to a whole new audience: a one-hour Home Box Office TV special, taped live at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and rerun numerous times since, and his first guest-host shot on "Saturday Night Live." "When I think back, it's probably lucky that I wasn't ready before now," he says. "It's like I was biding my time, doing my little act with the long hair and the turquoise jewelry, but it wasn't really me. I was just learning the craft."

Martin says all this as he sits one afternoon in a back booth at

the Hamburger Heaven on Sunset Boulevard. It is a delightfully sunny day in Los Angeles and he has just returned from a leisurely morning spent browsing through art books at a local book fair. He orders a glass of wine, then another, then a third, until a realization dawns on him: "I'm bombed for the first time in two years." Perhaps the indulgence is a celebration of his good mood, or maybe the alcohol has raised his spirits; in any case, the offstage Martin is uncharacteristically animated, almost expansive. The wall of reserve drops a bit, and he finds himself musing about his good fortune. "I'm the last person to admit I've achieved anything, until I see it right there in front of me. But now my friends say it to me, and I go, 'You're right, I can't deny it any more. We've made it.' And I know the edge is going to wear off someday, but I feel like it's a nice time to be living.

In the 1960s, the war tainted everything. It was such a serious time. That's the ironic thing about the 'Love Generation': they had no sense of humor. And then there was Watergate—that just killed showbiz because it was showbiz. Now it's like the '50s, in a way. It's a very optimistic time. I feel like show business and gossip are the really



With Bernadette Peters: "Fun news" is interesting

interesting things—the fun news. It ought to be on the front page every day. I think it's good for the joyful leaders of life, the entertainers, to get publicity instead of the murderers. Because eventually it'll all change. In 1982, there'll be a war, or the economy will crash, or something else terrible will happen."

For now, Steve Martin is holding court. He mugs and juggles, jostles and jests, wears \$700 suits and bunny ears, performs magic and makes balloon animals. And lest anyone misunderstand, there's a song he sings during each performance that comes right to the point. It's played to the accompaniment of a single, discordant banjo chord, and it goes:

*We're havin' some fun,  
We've got music and laughter and wonderful times.  
And you know, I see people goin' to college for 14 years,  
Studying to be doctors and lawyers.  
And I see people gettin' up at 7:30 each morning  
To go to the drugstore to sell Flair pens.  
But the most amazin' thing to me is  
I get paid for doin' this.*

—TONY SCHWARTZ



The hottest new comedian in America likes to weave weird balloon hats for himself and dance across the stage in a fit of "happy feet." If it sounds like the silly season is upon us, perhaps it is. Steve Martin—and fellow comics Chevy Chase and Martin Mull—represent a reaction against the comedy of relevance. They are the Good Humor men, clean-cut zanies who simply want their audiences to have a good time. Tony Schwartz reports. (Newsweek cover photo by Harold Krieger.)