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Shot to Hilarity: Behind the Scenes of "Comic Genius"

by Robin A. Rothman on October 15, 2013

The cover seems safe enough: Good ol' Steve Martin comes off dapper and subdued, a gentleman we now know as much for his romantic comedy acting as his "wild and crazy" old King Tut days (if not more so). But with a single turn the mood becomes manic, a grid of small oddities begging for a closer look.

Award-winning photographer Matt Hoyle combined high hopes, dogged persistence, intuitively clever conceits, and inspired artistic execution to bring us to this point. And it all culminates in *Comic Genius*, a collection of more than 100 unique portraits of more than 80 name-brand comedians -- sprinkled with insightful one-liners and loaded with visual nuance.

But it started much smaller than that. Hoyle says he initially aimed for 20-30 comedians, setting out with his team to pitch the idea, presenting between five and ten concepts to each. Steve Martin, Neil Patrick Harris, and Jason Bateman were early participants. Then, as he explains in the book's author's note, things snowballed.

"Once we had Mel Brooks it was a little easier to get a response from others," he writes. "Once we had Kermit the Frog, no one wanted to be left out."

Brooks -- who also provided a wonderfully quirky, poignantly poetic introduction called "Comedy is like an egg" and, as you'll read below, strong opinions about his portrait concept -- and Kermit wound up in amazing company. The table of contents reads like a comedy hall of fame: Ricky Gervais, Martin Short, Sarah Silverman, Jim Carrey, Carol Burnett... Seeing if your favorite funny person is on the list is too easy; try figuring out what great living comedian isn't there if you want a real challenge.

"I got greedy and tried to get as many as I could to make it the biggest book of its kind," says Hoyle. Greed, in this case, benefits everyone; the fact is that this labor of love is one of best-intentions, as well.

"I had always wanted to do something that would benefit even in some small way another group of people so that I'm not just doing a vanity project that does limited good. I specifically thought about who could use laughter the most and one good answer to that was children." Hoyle's net proceeds are being donated to [Save the Children](#).

We asked the man behind the lens to select a handful of images from the book and give us a little back story for them.

WARNING: Mel Brooks's reenactment from *The Producers* may be considered offensive to some.



TINA FEY

Tina Fey was so lovely and the concept we had was her holding a hip flask of whisky in a dainty child's tea party. She was kind enough to be part of the videos that I was also shooting with some key personalities as part of the project. We had shot Steve Martin & Kermit the Frog dueling banjos, Neil Patrick Harris as Buster Keaton, Jason [Bateman] with the nudists and quite a few more. Tina's was going to be an extension of the photo concept where she would be vacuuming her kid's room and then she would get caught up playing tea party and indulging in her whisky till it gets a little out of control. It was intimidating to hand one of the best comedy writers alive a paltry script but she took the script, looked at it, took a moment and added so much in such a short period of time.



CONAN O'BRIEN

Conan's concept was fun. We knew that if things went according to plan the idea would be perfect. We had his personal hairdresser do the babies hair and once in Conan's arms the baby would do what babies do. We weren't counting on it as it would have been a great shot even deadpan but for the little guy to be upset and Conan to be giving us the 'Oh Great.' look made it even better.



ROBIN WILLIAMS

Robin Williams has made me laugh ever since I was a little boy. "Mork and Mindy" was a time I remember actually hurting myself in my ribs as I laughed so hard at Robin as Mork. And then throughout his career he has continued to do so along with some heartfelt performances as well.

When you see Robin on tv or film he is a ball of energy, throwing out the lines like a savant. So we didn't know what to expect when he showed up for his shoot. He was actually quiet and reserved. Went to his dressing room where he got into his gnome costume. Came out to the set where we had designed a small little bit of woods where you'd likely find a gnome. And then boom. Robin performed the funniest mischievous gnome you could imagine. The shot of him relieving himself as he holds the leaf in front of his pulled down pants is inspired.



MEL BROOKS

One day I'm sitting at my desk and I get a phone call. "Matt Hoyle? Is this Matt Hoyle?, this is Mel Brooks. Look I got your ideas here. Now where are they, yes here they are. Ummm, yes, they stink. So here's what we're going to do. You're going to get a black comb from a drug store and I'm going to dress as Hitler and we'll do a photo of me doing the Hitler shot from *The Producers* with the comb as my mustache ok?"

"Yes Mr Brooks. That's great!"

To have my ideas rejected by the great Mel Brooks is better than to not have any ideas ever being considered by Mel Brooks. And then to have one of his ideas? Chocolate Icing.



JONATHAN WINTERS

I was honored to sit down at Jonathan Winters home and have him literally tell me his life story for the entire morning before I even picked up a camera. Then him giving us a small show with his kitty puppet. Little did I know it would be his last shoot.

Abhinav Agarwal's bookshelf pictured above ([Share yours](#))

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