

Mort Sahl Feels Brunt of Establishment 'Law'

By HAL HUMPHREY

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HOLLYWOOD — With its two-way radio shows and TV talk shows, the commercial broadcast industry has created an illusion that it is dealing with all shades of opinion in the political and social spectrums. It is only an illusion.

Most of what we hear on radio and hear-see on TV is created by consensus, and that consensus does not allow for anyone to be on the air too consistently with criticism of the Establishment. Humorist-critic-comedian Mort Sahl is living proof of that "law."

Network TV put the ban on Mort some time ago. The last time he enjoyed a semiregular spot on that level was with Jerry Lewis, when the latter had his ill-fated two-hour late night show on the ABC network for half a season.

Since then Mort has had to be content with a local weekly show on Channel 11, which he was fired from two weeks ago, and a two-way radio talk show on local radio station KLAC, which bounced, him last month. The Metromedia Corp., owners of both those outlets, charged him with insubordination at the TV station and failing to observe "the tenets of two-way radio" at KLAC.

Significantly, in neither instance was Sahl's audience rating in question. "The rating was adequate," said Jim Gates, program director for Channel 11, then admitted that "adequate" in this context meant the rating was on as high a level as it had ever been in the 13 months Sahl's show had been there.

Last December Mort got his notice from Channel 11, but was rehired a few days later, supposedly on the basis of a "new rating." Thousands of letters of protest had reached the station, whipped up to a large extent by Sahl informing his radio listeners of what had happened.

"When he was fired from KLAC last month, Sahl was told

It is true that Sahl is not a great one for adhering to "tenets" or promoting employer-employee relationships. He is an iconoclast with a brilliant incisiveness about the forces which make our world go around. He is accused of causing trouble, when more times than not he is only exposing it.

Sahl certainly can't be any more opinionated than Channel 11's Joe Pyne, who now enjoys syndication of his raucous show in some 40 other cities, but Pyne touches the nerves of only those he invites to argue and bicker with him. He is careful not to run counter to the consensus or ruffle management's feathers.

Former fans of Sahl's, and those include many so-called liberal Hollywood stars and members of the liberal-Democratic faith, try to dismiss Sahl now on the grounds that he has changed. He is paranoid, they insist, and no longer making any sense.

Sahl may have become more intensely embittered over the

state of the Establishment and the paths it is leading us down, but part of the change is in his former fans, who naively expected him to join them when they became the party in power and joined the Establishment.

The other day Sahl said he was confronted in a store by Rod Serling, the TV writer, who told Sahl that he (Serling) did not appreciate being attacked by Sahl on his show recently. After some fairly heated discussion, Serling turned and walked out, but was soon back and half apologizing to Sahl and telling him to "keep up the good work."

Sahl would like to keep up the good work, but he seems to have run out of radio and TV stations. We lose a lot of good, acerbic people this way. Coming to mind at the moment are Oscar Levant, who is miledwining somewhere, Henry Morgan, who's been relegated by "Consensus TV" to panel shows and a few shots with Merv Griffin, and now Mort Sahl.

by me not to go on Channel 11 and talk about it, but he would not follow those simple instructions," said Gates.

There were other Sahl actions which had burned up management — his persistent discussions of the Kennedy assassination with Mark Lane (author of "Rush to Judgment") and more recently Sahl's interviews with New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison on the same subject.